NOVEMBER 1996

ELLERY QUEEN®

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

TAKE A PAGE FROM THEIR BOOK

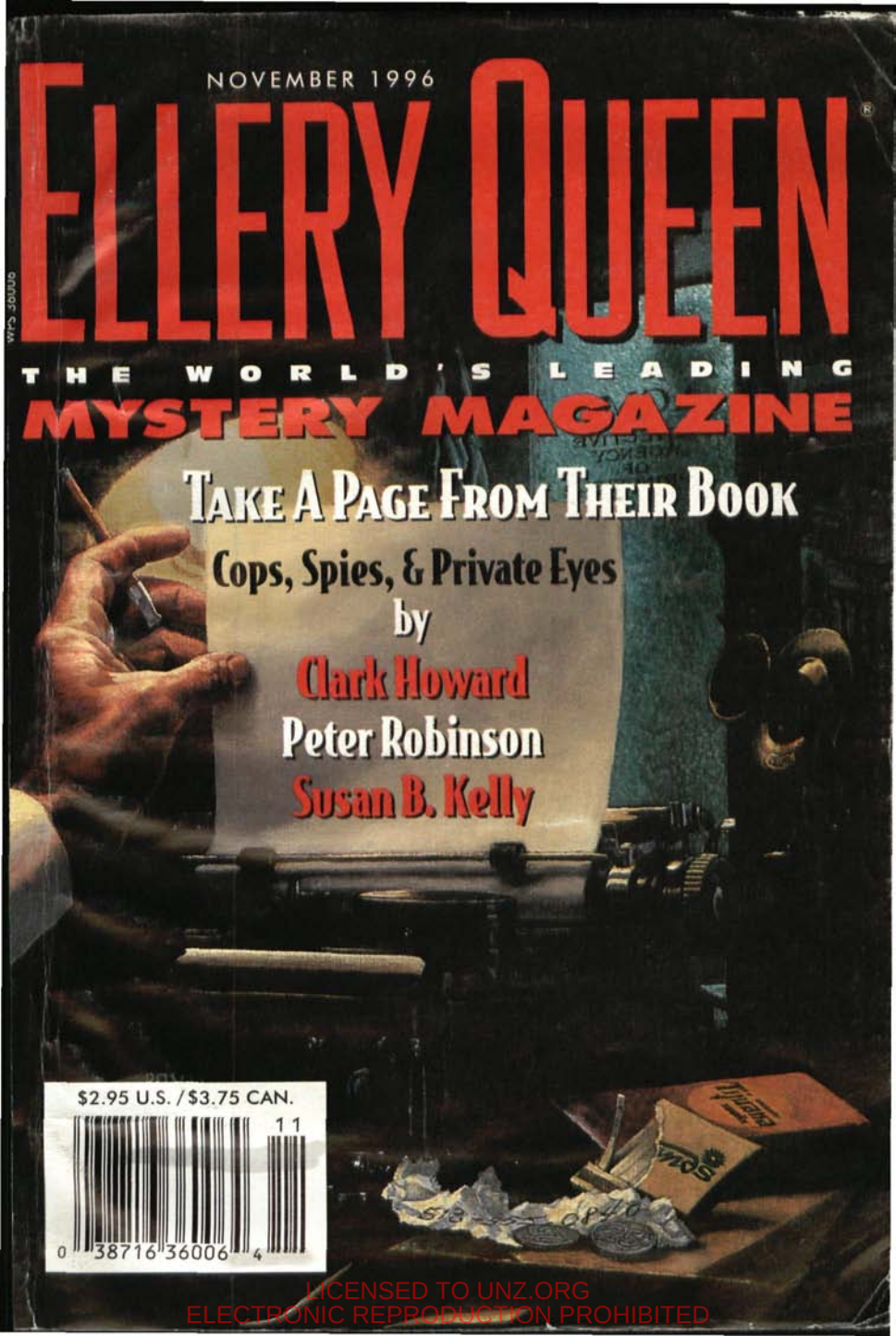
Cops, Spies, & Private Eyes

by

Clark Howard

Peter Robinson

Susan B. Kelly



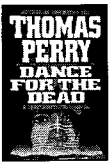
$2.95 U.S. / $3.75 CAN.

0 38716 36006 4 11

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

0802* $25.95/$12.98

3624 $19.95/$9.98



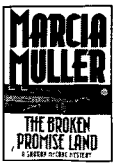
2881 $23.00/$11.98

3426 $24.00/$12.98

Mysteries to Die for

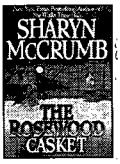
TAKE 6 BOOKS FOR 99¢

with membership in *Mystery Guild!*

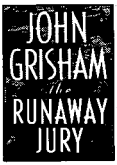


3673 $22.95/$10.98

1198 $21.00/$10.98



3509 $23.95/$12.98



1644 $26.95/$12.98

HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN...

A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION. Once your membership's accepted, we'll send your 6 BOOKS and FREE CLUB TOTE. If you're dissatisfied with the books, return them within 10 days *at our expense.* Membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The Tote is yours to keep.

HUGE DISCOUNTS ON HARDCOVER BOOKS. Save as much as *60% off* publishers' edition prices. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE. You'll receive up to 17 issues a year, plus up to 2 special issues with great selections and savings. Each reviews the Featured Book Selections plus dozens of alternate books.

SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE. To get the Featured Book Selections, *do nothing*—they will be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—return your Member Reply Form by the specified date. A shipping and handling charge (and sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order.

AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION. Take up to 2 years to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices. Afterwards, you may resign membership any time.

RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES. If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine was delayed and you had less than 10 days to respond, return the book *at our expense.*

* Explicit scenes and/or language

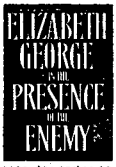
Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.

Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.

FREE TOTE
with membership

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

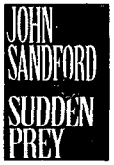
3517 $21.00/$10.98



3384 $21.95/$11.98

3392* $23.95/$12.98

3566* $23.00/$10.98



3608 $23.95/$10.98

0844 $22.95/$11.98

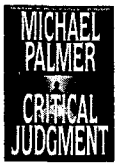
0448 $21.95/$10.98

3533 $22.95/$11.98

1388 $22.95/$10.98

0455 $21.95/$10.98

0570 $19.95/$9.98



0125 $22.95/$10.98

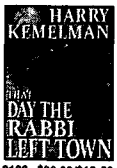
3145 $22.00/$9.98

3434 $22.95/$10.98

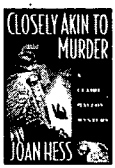
1735 $19.95/$9.98

2980 $23.95/$10.98

3590 $21.00/$9.98



2188 $22.00/$10.98



3582 $21.95/$10.98

2675* $24.00/$12.98

0711 $22.95/$9.98

1180* $23.95/$12.98

3640 $22.95/$12.98

0653* $22.95/$9.98

MYSTERY GUILD

MAIL TO: *Mystery Guild*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. Plus, send my Free Club Tote. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling.

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 more books. Bill me an added $3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

78074 32

33

Mr./Mrs. _____

Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQ 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

Washington's spy
Page 84

First Stories author
Dan Stumpf

Cover Illustration by
Bruce Wolfe

Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of
the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Note: indicia on
page 158

FICTION

The Banzai Pipeline BY CLARK HOWARD 4

Fan Mail BY PETER ROBINSON 23

The Closing Circle BY ED GORMAN 44

Stalking Horse BY SUSAN B. KELLY 73

The Monster BY BILL PRONZINI 80

The Uninvited Guest
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 84

Guilt Trip BY VAL MCDERMID 101

The Schemer's Holiday
BY PHIL LOVESEY 118

Green as Grass BY DOUG ALLYN 132

FIRST STORIES

The Stooge Audition
BY DAN STUMPF 109

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 39

POETRY

The Sister Hoods BY DAVID MICHAEL WALSH 79

Period Crime BY REX PONTI 117

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nine 60-minute audio cassettes for only... $9.60! *(a $53.91 value!)*

RADIO SPIRITS is on a mission to introduce thousands of new people to the joys of "old-time radio" programming. So, for a limited time, we're offering these 30-minute programs for the UNBELIEVABLE price of only 53 cents each! Nine hours of classic radio entertainment for only $9.60 plus $6.00 shipping and handling. You'll enjoy these terrific mystery radio shows over and over again!

Here's what you'll get...

Tape #1 - Suspense, three classic tales to keep you in Suspense!
Side A & B) "On A Country Road" Starring Cary Grant 11-16-50 / "Zero Hour" Starring Evelan Rudy 5-18-58 / "Three Skeleton Key" Starring Vincent Price 11-11-56 *(60 min.)*

Tape #2 - Inner Sanctum, with Raymond, your host!
Side A) "The Girl and the Gallows" 5-1-45 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "Dead to Rights" 5-22-45 *(30 min.)*

Tape #3 - Escape
Side A) "Leinnengen Versus the Ants" Starring Tudor Owen 8-4-49 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "Blood Bath" Starring Vincent Price 6-30-50 *(30 min.)*

Tape #4 - Lights Out! Hosted by Arch Oboler
Side A) "Murder Castle" Starring Joseph Kearns 8-3-43 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "Special to Hollywood" Starring Howard Duff 1944 *(30 min.)*

Tape #5 - The Mysterious Traveler, starring Maurice Tarplin
Side A) "The Good Die Young" 2-27-44 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "House of Death" 1-30-44 *(30 min.)*

Tape #6 - Mystery in the Air, starring Peter Lorre
Side A) "The Black Cat" 9-18-47 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "The Lodger" 8-14-47 *(30 min.)*

Tape #7 - Murder by Experts
Side A) "Dig Your Own Grave" 8-15-49 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "Return Trip" 9-5-45 *(30 min.)*

Tape #8 - The Whistler
Side A) "The Thin Line" 1-7-46 *(30 min.)*
Side B) "Black Book" 4-28-47 *(30 min.)*

Tape #9 - The Lux Radio Theatre
Side A & B) "Sorry, Wrong Number" Starring Barbara Stanwyck and Burt Lancaster 1-9-45 *(60 min.)*

Here's how to order...

Call Toll-Free (Visa or Mastercard) **1-800-RADIO-48**
(1-800-723-4648) and mention code GM4

...or send in this ad with a check or money order for $9.60 plus $6.00 shipping & handling payable to:

RADIO SPIRITS, c/o **MYSTERIES**, Box 2141, Schiller Park, IL 60176-2141

*Illinois residents please add 74 cents sales tax. Allow 14 days for delivery.
*RADIO SPIRITS has three more 9-cassette collections available for only $9.60 plus $6.00 shipping & handling. They are: DETECTIVES, SCIENCE FICTION and WESTERNS!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Istvan Banyai

THE BANZAI PIPELINE

by Clark Howard

Sonny Odum was waiting with his board outside the wax shop in Pearl City when Julie swung to the curb in her red Jeep to pick him up.

"How's it look?" she asked, bobbing her chin at the bright yellow surfboard he held.

"*Looks* fine," Sonny replied. "But it's how it *feels* in an avalanche that counts." An "avalanche" was one of the twenty-foot-tall mountains of water that rolled into a rumbling, roaring cylinder and crashed onto the beaches on the north shore of Oahu during the winter. Rolls of water that competition surfers called "banzai pipelines."

Wrapping his board in two thick, oversized terrycloth towels, Sonny carefully laid it on the Jeep's cargo deck. Looking up at the sun, measuring its position, he said, "Let's drive up to Sunset and see if I can catch a few to try it out."

©1996 by Clark Howard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Sure." Julie smiled and eased into the traffic of Route 99, which ran to the north shore. She was one of those stunningly exotic-looking women so incredibly common in Hawaii, with a last name all too appropriate for her ethnicity: Mixx. Julie Mixx. In her veins flowed blood that had originated in Tahiti, Portugal, China, Spain, the Philippines, and Utah—the latter courtesy of the Hawaiian campus of Brigham Young University. All of it had mixed to produce rich, glistening black hair, caramel-colored skin, slightly slanted eyes as light brown as macadamia nuts, and lips just a bit too large that were naturally blood red without cosmetic of any kind. When anyone asked what she was, Julie always said Peruvian and changed the subject; it was too difficult trying to remember which of her ancestors came from where. Sonny, whose own breed was not quite as varied as hers, answered the same question by shrugging and saying simply, "Mongrel."

The red Jeep made good time crossing over the ridge of the island and dropping down past Schofield Barracks, where James Jones had been stationed and had written about in *From Here to Eternity*. The book was Sonny and Julie's favorite, and on cool winter nights they liked to sit on the open lanai of their little house, bundled up in Hawaiian quilts that Sonny's grandmother had made, and read to each other from the book by lantern light before going inside to make love and then sleep. As they passed the military barracks now, they glanced at each other and smiled their secret.

Out past Haleiwa, when the highway had become Route 83, it clung to the side of the island, curved around Waimea Bay, and soon reached Sunset Beach. Julie parked on the side of the road and unwrapped Sonny's board as he stripped down to his swim trunks. He had a lean, powerful young body, solid as monkey-pod wood but flexible like a sapling, lithe as a ballet dancer. When he and Julie were together on a crowded beach, in swimwear, they turned heads like royalty.

Julie waited in the Jeep as Sonny carried his eight-foot-long board down to the beach. It was too late in the day for any swimmers, and the breakers were not challenging enough for any serious surfing. Only an old man sat cross-legged on a straw mat, drinking something out of a Pepsi bottle that wasn't Pepsi. He had wrinkled, parchmentlike skin and no teeth that Sonny could see,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but his eyes were sharp and bright. "Gonna do a little *he'enalu,* youngster?" he asked.

"Gonna try, old-timer," Sonny replied. *He'enalu* was Hawaiian for "wave-sliding."

"Muddah Ocean very big," the old man warned.

"Yeah," said Sonny, "but I'm fast." He winked at the old man and went down to the water's edge. Moments later, he was on his belly on the board, paddling away from shore.

Sonny didn't stay on the water too long; the waves were small, three or four feet, no test at all for a world-class surfer like himself, but they were good enough to tell him whether he had increased the amount of wax he had put on his board enough to add fourteen ounces of buoyancy to the back shin. He caught half a dozen rolls that were high enough to let him test his footing and pitch until he had satisfied himself that the balance was good enough for competition surfing. Good enough for monstrous waves, for sheer walls of water. Good enough for the banzai pipelines.

After skimming upright back to shore on his last catch, Sonny strode out of the surf, threw a salute to the old man, and trotted back up to the Jeep. There was a silver Corvette parked behind the Jeep when he got back, and a slick-looking dude in silk slacks and a designer shirt leaning against the front fender talking to Julie. Sonny walked up, ignored the stranger, and began rewrapping his board in the towels.

"How'd it do?" Julie asked, again bobbing her chin at the board.

"Good," said Sonny. "It did fine." He looked over at the man. "Better move away from that fender; we're going to be pulling away in a second."

The man smiled and came around the front of the Jeep. He was about Sonny's age, handsome, not white but lighter-skinned than Sonny or Julie, and well built, with good posture, walking with confidence. "You're Sonny Odum, right?" he said.

"Who wants to know?"

"My name's Jack Silva. I work for Mr. Socrates Lee. He asked me to find you and bring you to see him."

Sonny and Julie exchanged glances. Socrates Lee was the most powerful Chinese tong leader in the islands. Gambler, vice lord, drug wholesaler, some said even a killer, he was generally feared by anyone who knew his reputation.

"What's Soc Lee want with me?" Sonny asked.

"That's for Mr. Socrates Lee to tell you himself," said Jack Silva.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He asked that I bring you to his house at Kaneohe. We can go right down the east shore highway." Silva smiled over at Julie. "I'm sorry to make you drive back to Honolulu alone, but Mr. Socrates Lee only told me to bring Sonny."

Drying himself off after taking care of his board, Sonny stepped around closer to Jack Silva. "What if I don't want to go right now?"

"I'd have to make you," Silva said. He put on a pained look. "But why do something foolish, Sonny?"

"Think you could?" Sonny asked. "Make me, I mean?"

"Sure." Now Jack Silva's expression became serious. "Look, man, I know you're one of the best surfers around, and you're trim, strong, in good shape, all that. But you're no street fighter, Sonny, and I am. That's why Mr. Socrates Lee sent me. Now, come on. Be nice."

Sonny stared at Silva for a moment, weighing his words, then sighed quietly and reached for his shirt. "I'll see you back at the house," he said to Julie. As he buttoned the shirt, he said to Silva, "How'd you find me way up here?"

Silva smiled. "Mr. Socrates Lee said to look along the north shore for a red Jeep driven by the most beautiful girl on Oahu. He said you wouldn't be far away." He looked at Julie. "Mr. Socrates Lee was right—about both of you."

Julie had to work at repressing a smile she knew would annoy Sonny.

Socrates Lee was not as big as a sumo wrestler, but he was working at it. Below the short sleeves of a custom-made white silk shirt, the flabby flesh of his upper arms hung down four inches. His neck, thicker than Sonny Odum's thighs, had rolls of fat around it that looked like minibike tires. His belly protruded so far forward that he could not see his own penis without using a mirror. Oddly, his facial features had remained smallish, and behind round, thick eyeglasses, with a pursed little mouth, he had the countenance of an owl.

"Tell me," he said to Sonny quietly, as he always spoke, "are you in touch with your bruddah?"

Sonny, sitting before the tongmaster's desk, in a study that had three glass walls overlooking Kaneohe Bay, shrugged. "Buddy and I write each other a couple times a year." He glanced uncomfortably at Jack Silva, who stood nearby, arms folded, like a palace guard. Across the room from Silva stood two burly Chinese body-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guards. "I send money to his prison account when I win a competition and have some."

Soc Lee smiled. "You think you'll win the Banzai Pipeline Shootout this year?"

"Yeah, I do," Sonny replied calmly, without braggadocio. "This is my year, my time. I'm taking home twenty-five thousand and a gold cup."

"Lots of good competition to beat," Soc Lee observed. "Kid named Keith Hunt, from Florida, supposed to be a real hotshot. Jimmy Terangi from Tahiti, practically grew up on waves. And he's a goofy-footer besides; you know how the judges are always impressed by a left-footed surfer. Then there's Max Groves out of Santa Monica, fearless in the water. Junior Kanamoku from over on Maui, fifth-generation product of a surfing family that goes all the way back to Queen Liliuokalani." Soc Lee sighed, more quietly than he spoke. "Lots of competition."

"It's my year, my time," Sonny repeated confidently. "I'm gonna kick ass."

Soc Lee shook his head. "No, Sonny, you aren't. Not this year."

He's trying to fix the Shootout, Sonny thought. Sonny knew that vast amounts of money were wagered on the competition every year by the enormously wealthy Asian businessmen who made their Pacific headquarters in Honolulu. These men, from Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, Macao, and other financial capitals of Asia, kept lavish offices, homes, limousines, mistresses, and servants in Hawaii, to which they would come in their private jets, ostensibly on business trips but actually to party and gamble with others of their ilk. Much of Soc Lee's income came from these men.

"Are you looking to buy my performance, Mr. Lee?" Sonny asked, being very careful to maintain a respectful tone. "Because if you are, I have to tell you that it's not for sale. And all those other guys you just named: I don't think they'll go for it either. The Pipeline Shootout's not just for money and the gold cup; it's for pride, and honor. It's a chance to be the *best* at something."

"I understand that," said Soc Lee, "and you are blessed by the gods to have such a fine, athletic body, and such skills on the waves. But you must understand that you do not live in a world of your own. There are always other forces at work. Naturally, I cannot manage to totally control the entire competition, any more than a casino owner can control every roll of the dice. But I can control *enough* of the competition to weigh the odds in my favor and guarantee a substantial profit on the overall bets made."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Soc Lee adjusted his massive bulk in the reinforced chair in which he sat and laced his pigletlike fingers under a belly that took several seconds to stop quivering from the move.

"Those four surfers I named," the tongmaster continued, "will, along with you, be the five favorites in the Shootout. I already control two of those four. I won't say which two. One of them had a large gambling debt which I took care of and which his performance — or rather, lack of performance — will now repay me. The other is a closet gay who feels that if his sexual preference was publicized, it would jeopardize his surfing career. I am keeping his secret — and seeing that certain others, certain media people, do likewise. So, in controlling these two competitors, I control forty percent of the surfers favored to win." He paused just a beat. "With you, Sonny, I will control sixty percent. Then I cannot lose."

The line of Sonny's mouth tightened and his shoulders straightened just enough for Jack Silva to notice. Silva unfolded his arms.

"I won't do it," said Sonny. "I'm going for the win. The only way you can stop me is to hurt me somehow and keep me out of the competition. If you do that, you'll only control two of the four who are left. Fifty percent. No edge, no guarantee."

Soc Lee's pursed little lips reformed into a small smile. "It is refreshing to find that our young people can not only perform athletically, but are able to think, as well. You are quite correct, of course." His fingers unlaced and came together at their tips above his mound of belly. "Has it occurred to you why I asked you about your bruddah?"

Sonny swallowed and did not reply.

"He is being paroled from the federal prison in Arizona. Of course, there is a detainer on him from the state of Hawaii. He will be returned here to serve six years on the state charges."

Still Sonny did not comment. But he wondered if Soc Lee was going to try and trade Buddy's freedom for Sonny's cooperation. The tongmaster had high political connections, without a doubt extending to the pardon board. But if that was his plan, Sonny thought, he was wasting breath. Buddy had gone his own way; he would have to do his own time. Sonny would not lay down in the Pipeline Shootout to get his brother out of prison.

"You know," Soc Lee reminisced, "I once wanted Buddy to work for my tong. I offered him a good income, good future, security. But he was such a hardhead, always had to do everything his own way, be his own boss. Remember the way he used to strut around, like he was king of the hill? But he never thought about the conse-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

quences of what he did, how his conduct might affect others. As an example, when he was caught smuggling that load of illegal ivory through the Los Angeles airport, it created so much heat back here in Honolulu that I had to shut down my own ivory export operation for six months until the situation cooled down. That cost me a lot of money." Soc Lee smiled again, but this time it was a cold, threatening smile. "I promised myself that if Buddy ever got back to where I could get to him, I'd have both his kneecaps smashed so he couldn't strut anymore. And now here he's going to be in the Oahu prison where I have so many friends. What is the old saying? Everything comes to those who wait?"

Soc Lee looked at a platinum Rolex that was held to his fat wrist by three expandable bands connected together. His eyes, behind the thick glasses, were now flat and dangerous.

"I have no more time for this," he said peremptorily. "Here is my offer. Cooperate with me in the Shootout and I will give you ten thousand dollars and forgive your brother for his costly foolishness. Refuse to cooperate and you make an enemy of me, your brother is a cripple for the rest of his life—and you *still* might not win the Shootout. Think it over, boy." Soc Lee's head did not move, but his eyes shifted to Jack Silva. "Drive him into Honolulu. Drop him somewhere down in the patch where the winos and bums hang out That's where he's probably going to end up if he doesn't get smart."

Sonny was in a kabuki robe on the veranda, with his third bottle of rice beer, when Julie got home.

"Hi," she said. "Sorry I'm late. Auntie Lani's bursitis is giving her trouble again; I stopped by to see her after the show." The show was a rotating luau that performed on the grounds of a different hotel on Waikiki Beach every night. Julie was one of the show's three solo hula dancers. "What did Soc Lee want?" she asked.

Sonny told her. Julie stared at him incredulously for a moment, then became angry.

"I can't believe that fat son of a bitch! Doesn't he realize how hard you've worked for this?"

"Keep your voice down," Sonny cautioned. "When you're talking about Soc Lee, you don't want the neighbors to hear you."

"Well, what are you going to do?" She sat on the edge of the chaise and drank a swallow of his beer.

"I don't know," Sonny said quietly. "I want to talk to Buddy about it when he gets to Oahu Prison."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why are they bringing him back anyway?" Julie wanted to know. "I thought all the charges against him were federal."

"All but one. The time he has to do here is for statutory rape. Remember that girlfriend of his I told you about? The Korean girl from Lanai that he got pregnant and she had to have an abortion? Well, she was only seventeen."

Julie rolled her macadamia eyes. "Did Buddy know?"

Sonny shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Wouldn't have made any difference to the state cops; they were so hot to get Buddy, they would have nailed him for anything they could."

Julie took him by the hand. "Come on, it's getting too cool to sit out here."

She led him into the bathroom and ran a tub into which she sprinkled ginger soap and coconut oil. He sat on a little stool in front of her vanity while she undressed.

"Do you think Soc Lee can really hurt Buddy like he said?" she asked. Sonny nodded.

"Soc Lee can do just about anything he wants to do. He's got more power than the governor."

Julie wound her hair into a pile on top of her head and fashioned a towel to hold it in place. Stepping into the tub, she lay down in the water and rested her head back. Sonny went over and sat on the edge of the tub. From a glass jar, he worked out a quantity of mango paste and Julie raised one foot out of the water for him. Slowly Sonny spread the mango over her instep, between her toes, over the heel and the delicate arch, and particularly the underpads of her toes, which were so important in the traditional hula dancing she performed.

"God, that feels good," she said, her voice almost a purr. For several minutes, as Sonny worked on first one foot, then the other, Julie rested with her eyes closed, surrendering completely to his pampering. But when it was over, she looked up at Sonny and said, "Getting our little swimwear boutique depends on your winning the Shootout."

"I know that," Sonny replied quietly. "I'll try to work something out."

Julie washed herself and stood in the tub while she rinsed with a hand-held shower head. When she was finished, she stepped out of the tub onto a bath mat and Sonny began drying her with a thick Turkish towel, patting gently to absorb all the water from all the places on her body.

"You know I can't let my brother be crippled by that fat snake, don't you?" he asked quietly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, I know," Julie said.

"Buddy did too much for me when I was little, after our mother died. I owe him."

"I understand, Sonny. I don't expect you to turn your back on your brother. I just hate it that a pig like Soc Lee can do this to us."

Julie turned off the bathroom light and reached into the bedroom to turn that one off too. Then she untied the belt of Sonny's kabuki robe, removed it, and hung it on the door.

"Come on—"

The bedroom was blue with moonlight let in by the open shutters, through which also came the restless night sound of the surf and an occasional rustle of palm fronds, and sometimes a whistle of wind as the pure island air cooled and settled.

Sonny never knew from night to night what Julie wanted, so he always sat on the side of the bed and waited for her to position him so that one of them could begin. Tonight she gently pushed him onto his back with two pillows under his head, and he felt her calf brush the top of his shoulder. One of her thighs rested on his chest. Normally, their whispers of passion would begin.

But no words of love were spoken on this night. Instead, their ardor was prefaced by murmurs of murder.

"I wish Soc Lee were dead," Julie said.

"So do I."

"I'd like to kill him."

"So would I," said Sonny, just before she covered his mouth.

Several mornings later, very early, Sonny was on his Honda motorcycle, speeding along the highway around Kahuku Point on his way to Kawela to practice, when he saw a silver Corvette parked on the shoulder above one of the quieter stretches of beach protected by a reef. Pulling over, Sonny squinted his eyes and scanned the water until he located a solitary figure paddling out on a board. Presently the figure rose and stood on the board, catching a medium wave, eight or nine feet high, and riding it obliquely into shore.

Parking his cycle, Sonny unstrapped his own board from the carry rack and made his way along a rough path down to the sand. Jack Silva was sitting on his board, resting, a towel around his shoulders, when Sonny walked up.

"I didn't know you were a surfer," Sonny said.

"I'm not," Silva replied. *"You're* a surfer. I just fool around a little."

Sonny stuck his board in the sand and knelt down. He bobbed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his chin at Silva's board. "Nice piece of wood. One of the best. Very expensive. Soc Lee must pay you pretty good to be his errand boy."

Silva turned steady eyes to Sonny and studied him for a moment. Then he said evenly, "For your information, Sonny, Mr. Socrates Lee doesn't pay me a dime. My family in Macao pays Mr. Socrates Lee to let me serve as an apprentice to him and observe his business style and acumen." He tilted his head slightly. "Do you know where Macao is?"

"Near China, I think."

"It's a six-square-mile island fifty-five minutes by jetfoil from Hong Kong. Half a million people live on that little island. My family controls one of the largest business syndicates there. We have interests in toy manufacturing, electronics equipment manufacturing, and extensive textiles production. We also control all of the gambling, both legal and illegal. There is no legal gambling in Hong Kong, so like the Californians who drive to Las Vegas to engage in that activity, people in Hong Kong take the jetfoils to Macao. There are seventy of them every day, and the fare is less than twenty dollars. By the time the new century arrives, I will be in charge of all that gambling."

"Congratulations," said Sonny. "Must be nice to come from a powerful family and not have to do anything on your own." He stood up and looked out at the waves. A twelve-footer rolled onto shore. "Want to catch a few? Or are the ones coming in now too big for you?"

Silva rose and faced him. "I told you, I'm not a surfer, Sonny."

"Yeah, but you're a gambler. Take a gamble on the next few waves. Maybe they won't be as high." Sonny already *knew* the next waves wouldn't be as high. They would be four-, five-, six-foot waves. The ninth wave would be the next big one. That was the way Muddah Ocean played.

A five-footer broke, then another. "Come on, man," Sonny taunted. "If you get in trouble, I'll pull you out."

Silva bent and picked up his board. "Lead the way," he said.

They paddled out as the third and fourth waves came crashing in, and were far enough out to catch the fifth one, a seven-footer, and ride it back in side by side, both of them sliding onto the sand upright. Without pausing, Sonny turned and began paddling back out again. Silva frowned, hesitated, breathing a little heavily, then clenched his jaw and followed. They paddled over the sixth and seventh waves and caught the eighth one. It was a nine-footer that they both swept up onto and they rose to stand on its swell as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it sped like a huge unrolling carpet toward the beach. Sonny saw Silva hold his position until the coil of water shifted slightly as it adjusted to the curve of the land, and then Silva was suddenly upside down, without a board, and the ocean was sending him home like driftwood. Sonny waited until he was closer to shore and then intentionally aborted so that he would be swept onto the beach just as Silva was. Behind them came the ninth wave, a thirteen-footer that brought their boards with it.

They lay on the sand panting as Sonny mentally counted five smaller waves. Then he said, "How about one more?"

Silva returned a flat, knowing look. "You think drowning me will scare Soc Lee off?"

"This has got nothing to do with Soc Lee," Sonny said coldly. "This is just you and me and Muddah Ocean. Are you game or aren't you?"

Sonny watched Silva's face turn into the face of a killer for the first time. If Sonny decided not to cooperate with Socrates Lee, he knew it would be Jack Silva that the tongmaster sent to extract his ultimate revenge. Because Soc Lee wouldn't simply cripple Buddy Odum; if Sonny won the Shootout, Soc Lee would make Sonny pay also. And it would be Jack Silva who came to collect that debt. The killer's face that Sonny was looking at on the beach at that moment might be the last face he ever saw in his lifetime.

But Sonny could not help thinking: If he killed Jack Silva, *would* Soc Lee back off?

"How about it?" Sonny challenged again.

Silva said evenly, totally without fear, "I'll give you one shot at me, just to show you I'm a better man than you are. Pick your wave."

The sixth wave was just washing sand.

"Third one from now," Sonny said.

"Let's go," Silva nodded.

Once again they paddled away from the beach. On their stomachs on the boards, using their arms for oars, they went up and over the seventh wave, a soft six-footer that bore them no malice. They paddled farther. Soon the eighth wave was rushing them. It was a flat seven-footer, with no real roll, no particular menace to it: just a sheet of ocean that they were able to force themselves through like needles through silk.

The ocean grew quieter then, stiller, as if pausing for breath. Out ahead of them as Sonny and Silva rose to stand on their boards was a rushing wall of water at least eighteen feet high,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rolling in a swell that formed a nine-foot cylindrical channel within its own shape.

A pipeline, Sonny thought. Perfect. The ninth-ninth wave. A killer.

It was on them very quickly, a thundering roll of surging ocean that meant to topple and swallow anything between it and the land mass it assaulted. Like a runaway tractor-trailer rig on a downhill highway, like an avalanche of snow breaking away from a mountain, like a skyscraper with its foundation imploded, it was unstoppable. A monster unloosed.

Sonny had a split second to watch Silva position his board to let the rolling swell take him to the top of the wave, then Sonny had to maneuver his own board or be caught in a bad wipeout. He shifted directions and let the roll go over him, then straightened inside the cylinder of water and rode its floor, surfing not toward the beach but through the pipeline, perpendicular to shore. It was an eerie, quieter ride, the majority of the noise and danger outside, a womblike security inside.

Above him, Sonny saw Jack Silva's board skimming the top. It was only a matter of seconds, he knew, before the velocity of the roll spun the board from under Silva's feet and pitched him headfirst into the pipeline to tumble like a dove caught in a whirlwind until all the air had been forced from his lungs, then to be tossed dead onto the beach, another victim of the widowmaker sea.

When it did happen, Sonny held perfect balance and watched in fascination as Silva toppled, tossed, bounced, and contorted helplessly in a place he was never meant to be. He was upside down, feet toward the sky, head and shoulders down in the pipeline roof, arms flailing, hands grasping at nothing—when Sonny decided he could not let him die that way.

Skimming sideways up the inside wall of the swirling cylinder, Sonny grabbed Silva under one armpit and pulled him all the way into the pipeline where there was air, then skimmed down again to the floor. Pulling the momentarily weightless man behind him, he caught the bottom flow of water and sped like a bullet going through a rifle barrel toward the circle of sky and sunlight and beach that was the hole of the pipeline wave.

They shot out the end of the wave onto the face of its flank water and both went flopping like the land animals they were until the water dropped them with unceremonious disdain back where they belonged, on the beach. They lay panting and gasping, choking, Silva blue-faced and regurgitating salt water, Sonny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leaning forward to his upright knees, hugging his ribcage where the board had hit him as they emerged and the flank water took it from under him.

"You—were right—" Sonny finally managed to say, "you're—no surfer. You don't ride—the top of pipelines; you ride—inside."

When Silva caught enough breath to answer, he said, "You're a fool, Sonny. That wave had me. Had me gone. My family would have killed Mr. Socrates Lee for it."

"Like I told you, man," Sonny said, standing up, "this was—just between you, me, and Muddah Ocean."

Sonny strode off down the beach where he could see his board had floated in.

Two days later, Sonny got home from another morning practice just as Julie was getting into her Jeep to leave.

"I'm going over to Auntie Lani's," she said. "Her bursitis has spread down into her elbows and she wants me to put some herbal compresses on her. Listen, I put a note on the table for you. There was a call from some counselor named Slater out at Oahu Prison. He wants you to come out there and see him. I guess your brother must have transferred in."

"Probably. You be back before the show?"

"I doubt it. You know Auntie Lani and her bursitis."

"Okay." He leaned into the Jeep to kiss her. "See you after."

In the house, Sonny showered with ginger soap to get the dried salt off his skin, then toweled dry and rubbed his body down with coconut cream. Pulling on a pair of cotton shorts, he went into the kitchen, read the note Julie had written for him, and foraged in the refrigerator for something to eat. There was some cold *ono* left over from their dinner the previous evening. It was a gray game fish, good hot or cold, with or without oil. Restaurants in the islands called it "wahoo" on their menus because they didn't think tourists would order a dish that reminded them of a dead rock star's widow.

Sonny got the *ono* out, sprinkled salt on it, and opened a 7UP. Going out to the porch, he sat down to eat. While he was sitting there, a white sedan with a State of Hawaii seal on the door pulled into the driveway. A tall Anglo, about forty, got out and came over to the porch.

"You Sonny Odum?"

"Who wants to know?" Sonny asked, without rancor.

"My name's Fred Slater. I'm a counselor out at Oahu Prison. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

left a message this morning for Sonny Odum to come out and see me, but I had to come into Honolulu anyway so I thought I'd stop by, take a chance of catching him."

"You caught him," Sonny said. "Want a 7UP or something?"

"No, thanks anyway."

"Buddy get in? That why you want to see me?"

"Not exactly. Buddy did get in. He was one of three transferred prisoners that were brought in on a Department of Justice plane last night."

Sonny nodded, chewing. "How's he doing?"

"Not very well," Slater said. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Sonny, but your brother is dead."

"What—?" Sonny stared at the man.

"He was stabbed to death in the chow line at breakfast this morning. Another inmate did it. Korean kid. He said he did it to preserve the honor of his family name. Claimed your brother had defiled his sister some years back when she was a teenager. Said his sister had to have an abortion because of Buddy. We don't know how true any of it is—"

"It's true," Sonny said quietly. "She was the girl they got him on the statutory rape charge for."

"I see." Slater nodded.

"Did Buddy die quick?"

"Yes, he did. The kid stuck a shank in his stomach and walked halfway around him with it. He was dead in just a couple minutes. The kid's name is—"

"No!" Sonny interrupted urgently. "I don't want to know his damn name, man! If I know his name, I'll think about him. I'll want to know what he looks like, where he is, and I'll start thinking about preserving the honor of *my* family name."

Sonny set aside the plate with what was left of his food and stood up. Off in the distance, he could see rain clouds gathering around Palikea Peak, which rose three thousand feet above the island. Rain clouds over Oahu seemed always to accumulate at Palikea before spreading out over the heights and bringing rain down to the city and the coast. Some on the island called the clouds "little old ladies" and Palikea "the market," and they would say, "Hey, bruddah, the little old ladies are gathering at the market, so take an umbrella today."

The man named Slater handed Sonny a Department of Corrections business card. "Have a funeral home contact me and I'll give them the procedure for picking up the body."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah, sure," Sonny said, taking the card. "Thanks for the help."

Slater seemed to feel awkward, as if there was something more he needed to say. Finally he ventured, "I guess it's some consolation that at least he died back in Hawaii."

Sonny shook his head. "He didn't die in Hawaii, mister. He died in jail. When you die in jail, does it matter where the jail is?"

"No. No, I guess not," Slater said. He went back to his car and drove away.

Sonny sat on the edge of the porch and began to cry. He looked back up at the clouds around Palikea again. Jesus, he thought, please don't let it be raining when I bury my brother.

It did not rain, but neither did the sun shine at the little cemetery just outside Waipahu where Buddy Odum was laid to rest in a plot where his parents and grandparents were buried. The morning was pleasantly cool and overcast, the air not yet moist enough for discomfort. There was still dew on the cemetery grass and Buddy's pallbearers left footprints when they carried his casket from the hearse to the open grave.

There were not many people there with Sonny and Julie. A few cousins came over from Lanai, and several surfers were there out of respect for Sonny; there were a few old people who had known the Odum family for many years; and back on the fringe of the group were a couple of cold-eyed men with coiled cobras tattooed on their necks who had known Buddy before his fall. The ceremony at the gravesite was very brief, with an Island Methodist who had never known the deceased saying a few generic prayers for anyone who was dead.

When it was all over, the people there passed by the casket and dropped fresh flowers, most of them picked from the roadside, onto the plain maple box waiting to be lowered. They shook hands with Sonny and straggled away in twos and threes, leaving Sonny and Julie there for a last few minutes in private.

"There's one more gravesite in the plot," Julie observed. "That for you?"

Sonny nodded absently. "Yeah." It occurred to him after a moment what her question meant. "That doesn't mean I *have* to be buried here. You know, not if we stayed together."

"I understand," Julie said. But Sonny could see in her light brown eyes that she was troubled.

After a few minutes, two cemetery workers came and stood

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nearby with shovels, and Sonny took Julie's arm and turned away. "Come on, let's go."

The funeral hearse had gone, as had the cars and trucks that the mourners had arrived in, and Julie's red Jeep would have been the last vehicle parked on the narrow cemetery road—except that a silver Corvette was now pulled up behind it. Jack Silva was waiting next to it.

"Mr. Socrates Lee sends his condolences," Silva said, "and he wants me to bring you up to his house."

"Can't this wait?" Julie asked. Her voice, to Sonny's surprise, was oddly soft. It was unlike her not to become angry and indignant at such effrontery.

"No, it can't wait," Silva said. "I'm sorry."

"Then I'm going too," Julie said, and now her voice lost its softness and was more what Sonny expected from her.

"I don't think that's wise," Silva protested.

"Wise or not," Sonny made a stand, "either she goes or I don't." He stepped toward Silva. "I'm not afraid of you, street fighter. You and I can finish it right here, right now, if you want it that way."

Silva stared intently at Julie for a moment, then shook his head at Sonny's challenge. "She can go," he conceded.

Socrates Lee was behind the same desk where he had sat at Sonny's first meeting with him, and the same two burly Chinese bodyguards were in their same positions, as if they had never moved. The tongmaster's expression darkened when he saw Julie come in with Sonny. His already slitted eyes narrowed even more at Jack Silva.

"You were sent for one person and you bring me two," he said with displeasure.

"It was either bring the woman or cause a public scene," Silva replied calmly, unintimidated. "I thought you would prefer the quieter way."

"What I *prefer,*" Soc Lee snapped, "is that my instructions be carried out exactly as given." He shifted his eyes to Sonny. "Condolences on your brother's untimely death. In exchange for your cooperation in the Shootout, I will see to it that his killer suffers a similar fate."

Sonny shook his head. "No deal. I'll let the law take care of him."

"I see. Very commendable. Very well, it is your family." Soc Lee drummed chicken-leg fingers on his desk. "All right, in the absence of other consideration, I will increase the amount of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

money I originally offered. You will now receive thirty thousand dollars, which is more than the first-place prize money."

Again Sonny shook his head. "No."

"What exactly is it you want then?" the tongmaster asked impatiently.

"I want to win the Shootout. I want to be champion of the Banzai Pipeline. I want to be the *best* at something."

"Unfortunately, that is not possible. My betting arrangements have been made. Wagers are already coming in to my computers from the entire Pacific rim. I must insist that you cooperate. Thirty-five thousand."

"No."

"Forty. My final offer. I am out of patience."

"No."

Soc Lee sighed wearily. "Why is it that nothing is ever simple anymore?" he asked rhetorically. Looking over at Silva, he said, "Perhaps your bringing the woman here was fortuitous, after all." His eyes surveyed Julie Mixx from head to toe and back again. "Lovely. A tribute to the mixed blood of our islands." He smiled at Julie. "How would you like to be my guest until the surfing competition is over, my dear?"

"She's not a part of this, Lee!" Sonny took a step forward, hands closing into fists. The two bodyguards moved with surprising dexterity to block his way.

"I beg to differ," said Soc Lee. "She just became my insurance that you will cooperate—without payment. Lock her in my special room in the cellar," he ordered one of the bodyguards. "Prepare an injection to keep her quiet." The bodyguard grabbed Julie roughly by the arm.

"Let her go," the voice of Jack Silva interrupted. He had drawn a Beretta .40-caliber Cougar automatic from the back of his belt and was attaching to it a Disil silencer he had taken from his pocket.

"Are you mad?" Soc Lee asked in astonishment.

"No, I just don't like your management style," Silva said.

He shot each of the bodyguards once in the forehead. The Beretta made an odd *thoom* sound as it fired through the silencer.

"Silva, wait!" the tongmaster implored. "This is insanity—"

"Goodbye, Mr. Socrates Lee," Silva said.

His third shot burrowed deep into the tongmaster's brain.

Just after sunrise on the morning of the Shootout, Sonny Odum

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

parked Julie's red Jeep in a roped-off contestant parking area and carried his board down to the beach. There was already a crowd of spectators spread out all along the grassy ridge above the sand, including the usual contingent of nubile young surfer groupies in string bikinis. Sonny was a handsome figure, his tanned, toned body set off by white swim trunks and a white windbreaker; half a dozen groupies shouted and flirted with him as he made his way toward the competition area. One of the young women, a slim-and-slung redhead with a diamond tennis bracelet on one wrist, yelled, "Hey, Sonny, I'm throwing a party tonight at Michel's-at-the-Beach. Why don't you drop by?"

Sonny smiled and waved at her. Michel's-at-the-Beach was the fanciest restaurant on Oahu. He continued on down to the operations tent where he had to formally register and go behind a portable screen to provide a male nurse with a urine sample for drug testing.

"How's it look out there?" he asked one of the technicians monitoring a printout of the wave patterns, currents, and winds being measured by offshore buoys.

"Fast and high," the tech said.

Sonny smiled. Fast currents, high waves. Out of sight. He felt his adrenaline building.

From the ops tent, Sonny walked across the beach to another roped-off area where other competitors waited. The ones he had to beat were already there: Keith Hunt, an arrogant, boasting hot-shot from Miami; Max Groves, a crew-cut blond Adonis from Santa Monica who feared no wave; Jimmy Terangi, from Tahiti, who grew up on the waves and was a goofy-footer besides; Junior Kanamoku, from Maui, latest in a long line of magnificent Hawaiian pureblood surfers.

All there, Sonny thought, and two of them still believed they were under Soc Lee's thumb. There had been no publicity about his death. The tong had quietly disposed of the three bodies, and a new tongmaster had been elected and installed. As was traditional, all old tong business was considered terminated, all old debts canceled, all old feuds ended, and a new tong begun. That was the way it had always been in the islands.

Sonny joined the other four favorites, who were in a group in one corner of the roped area, and shook hands all around. Then he said to all of them, as casually as possible, "I've been told that the island tongmaster, Socrates Lee, died a couple of days ago. I heard that the new tongmaster canceled all wagering on the Shootout. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guess that means we're all even money for the first time." He looked from one to another so that they could see what was reflected in his eyes. "We can all," he emphasized, "do our best without concern about money and betting and outside pressures. It'll just be us and Muddah Ocean today." He held a hand out, palm down. "Agreed?"

One by one, the others put their hands on his and said, "Agreed."

Junior Kanamoku broke a wide smile. "Today," he said, "we are all *hui nalu.* United in the surf."

The five young warriors of the waves all wished each other good luck, and the group broke up, each moving off alone for a few minutes of solitude before the competition began.

Sonny found a corner with a wooden folding chair and took off his windbreaker to acclimate his upper torso to the morning air. As he hung his jacket on the back of the chair, a folded slip of paper fell out of a pocket onto the sand. Retrieving it, Sonny unfolded and read it for the last time. It was a note Julie had left him the morning after Jack Silva had killed Soc Lee and his bodyguards.

> Dear Sonny,
>
> I hope you won't hate me for this, but I am going to Macao with Jack. As the song says, it was just one of those things; it hit both of us the first time we met.
>
> I know you're going to win the Shootout. You'll have a wonderful life and I'll be proud of you. I'll always remember our time together.
>
> Love,
>
> Julie
>
> P. S. You can have the Jeep. And don't worry about Auntie Lani's bursitis. She's okay; I was with Jack.

With a wry smile, Sonny crumpled the note into a ball and tossed it into a nearby trash can. Looking back at the spectators, he located the slim-and-slung redhead and waved to her. She waved back.

Then he turned and looked at the ocean. I'm coming, Muddah, he thought. We'll do things today, you and me, that nobody's ever seen before.

Sonny took in a deep breath of sea air. This was his time. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FAN MAIL

by Peter Robinson

Not all writers are great readers, but Peter Robinson, a Yorkshireman who lives and works in Canada, is—as is evident in his latest short story, which displays a connoisseur's knowledge of crime fiction. Mr. Robinson is a much celebrated writer whose last story for *EQMM*, "Summer Rain" (December 1994), was nominated for the Canadian Crime Writers' Arthur Ellis Award for best short story.

The letter arrived one sunny Thursday morning in August, along with a Visa bill and a royalty statement. Dennis Quilley carried the mail out to the deck of his Beaches home, stopping by the kitchen on the way to pour himself a gin and tonic. He had already been writing for three hours straight, and he felt he deserved a drink.

First he looked at the amount of the royalty check, then he put aside the Visa bill and picked up the letter carefully, as if he were a forensic expert investigating it for prints. Postmarked Toronto and dated four days earlier, it was addressed in a small, precise hand and looked as if it had been written with a fine-nibbed calligraphic pen. But the postal code was different; that had been hurriedly scrawled in with a ballpoint. Whoever it was, Quilley thought, had probably got his name from the telephone directory and had then looked up the code in the post office just before mailing.

Pleased with his deductions, Quilley opened the letter. Written in the same neat and mannered hand as the address, it said:

Dear Mr. Quilley,

Please forgive me for writing to you at home like this. I know you must be very busy, and it is inexcusable of me to

©1996 by Peter Robinson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

intrude on your valuable time. Believe me, I would not do so if I could think of any other way.

I have been a great fan of your work for many years now. As a collector of mysteries, too, I also have first editions of all your books. From what I have read, I know you are a clever man, and, I hope, just the man to help me with my problem.

For the past twenty years, my wife has been making my life a misery. I put up with her for the sake of the children, but now they have all gone to live their own lives. I have asked her for a divorce, but she just laughed in my face. I have decided, finally, that the only way out is to kill her, and that is why I am seeking your advice.

You may think this is insane of me, especially saying it in a letter, but it is just a measure of my desperation. I would quite understand it if you went straight to the police, and I am sure they would find me and punish me. Believe me, I've thought about it. Even that would be preferable to the misery I must suffer day after day.

If you can find it in your heart to help a devoted fan in his hour of need, please meet me on the roof lounge of the Park Plaza Hotel on Wednesday, August 19, at two P.M. I have taken the afternoon off work and will wait longer if for any reason you are delayed. Don't worry, I will recognize you easily from your photo on the dust jacket of your books.

Yours, in hope,

A Fan

The letter slipped from Quilley's hand. He couldn't believe what he'd just read. He was a mystery writer—he specialized in devising ingenious murders—but for someone to assume that he did the same in real life was absurd. Could it be a practical joke?

He picked up the letter and read through it again. The man's whining tone and cliched style seemed sincere enough, and the more Quilley thought about it, the more certain he became that none of his friends was sick enough to play such a joke.

Assuming that it was real, then, what should he do? His impulse was to crumple up the letter and throw it away. But should he go to the police? No. That would be a waste of time. The real police were a terribly dull and literal-minded lot. They would probably think he was seeking publicity.

He found that he had screwed up the sheet of paper in his fist, and he was just about to toss it aside when he changed his mind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wasn't there another option? Go. Go and meet the man. Find out more about him. Find out if he was genuine. Surely there would be no obligation in that? All he had to do was turn up at the Park Plaza at the appointed time and see what happened.

Quilley's life was fine—no troublesome woman to torment him, plenty of money (mostly from American sales), a beautiful lakeside cottage near Huntsville, a modicum of fame, the esteem of his peers—but it had been rather boring of late. Here was an opportunity for adventure of a kind. Besides, he might get a story idea out of the meeting. Why not go and see?

He finished his drink and smoothed the letter on his knee. He had to smile at that last bit. No doubt the man would recognize him from his book-jacket photo, but it was an old one and had been retouched in the first place. His cheeks had filled out a bit since then, and his thinning hair had acquired a sprinkling of grey. Still, he thought, he was a handsome man for fifty: handsome, clever, and successful.

Smiling, he picked up both letter and envelope and went back to the kitchen in search of matches. There must be no evidence.

Over the next few days, Quilley hardly gave a thought to the mysterious letter. As usual in summer, he divided his time between writing in Toronto, where he found the city worked as a stimulus, and weekends at the cottage. There, he walked in the woods, chatted with locals in the lodge, swam in the clear lake, and idled around getting a tan. Evenings, he would open a bottle of Chardonnay, reread P. G. Wodehouse, and listen to Bach. It was an ideal life: quiet, solitary, independent.

When Wednesday came, though, he drove downtown, parked in the multi-story at Cumberland and Avenue Road, then walked to the Park Plaza. It was another hot day. The tourists were out in force across Bloor Street by the Royal Ontario Museum, many of them Americans from Buffalo, Rochester, or Detroit: the men in loud checked shirts photographing everything in sight, their wives in tight shorts looking tired and thirsty.

Quilley took the elevator up to the nineteenth floor and wandered through the bar, an old-world place with deep armchairs and framed reproductions of old colonial scenes on the walls. It was busier than usual, and even though the windows were open, the smoke bothered him. He walked out onto the roof lounge and scanned the faces. Within moments he noticed someone looking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his way. The man paused for just a split second, perhaps to translate the dust-jacket photo into reality, then beckoned Quilley over with raised eyebrows and a twitch of the head.

The man rose to shake hands, then sat down again, glancing around to make sure nobody had paid the two of them undue attention. He was short and thin, with sandy hair and a pale grey complexion, as if he had just come out of hospital. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and had a habit of rolling his tongue around in his mouth when he wasn't talking. "First of all, Mr. Quilley," the man said, raising his glass, "may I say how honored I am to meet you." He spoke with a pronounced English accent.

Quilley inclined his head. "I'm flattered, Mr. . . . er . . . ?"

"Peplow, Frank Peplow."

"Yes . . . Mr. Peplow. But I must admit I'm puzzled by your letter."

A waiter in a burgundy jacket came over to take Quilley's order. He asked for an Amstel.

Peplow paused until the waiter was out of earshot: "Puzzled?"

"What I mean is," Quilley went on, struggling for the right words, "whether you were serious or not, whether you really do want to—"

Peplow leaned forward. Behind the lenses, his pale blue eyes looked sane enough. "I assure you, Mr. Quilley, that I was, that I *am* entirely serious. That woman is ruining my life and I can't allow it to go on any longer."

Speaking about her brought little spots of red to his cheeks. Quilley held his hand up: "All right, I believe you. I suppose you realize I should have gone to the police?"

"But you didn't."

"I could have. They might be here, watching us."

Peplow shook his head. "Mr. Quilley, if you won't help, I'd even welcome prison. Don't think I haven't realized that I might get caught, that no murder is perfect. All I want is a chance. It's worth the risk."

The waiter returned with Quilley's drink, and they both sat in silence until he had gone. Quilley was intrigued by this drab man sitting opposite him, a man who obviously didn't even have the imagination to dream up his own murder plot. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"I have no right to ask anything of you, I understand that," Peplow said. "I have absolutely nothing to offer in return. I'm not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rich. I have no savings. I suppose all I want really is advice, encouragement."

"If I were to help," Quilley said. *"If* I were to help, then I'd do nothing more than offer advice. Is that clear?"

Peplow nodded. "Does that mean you will?"

"If I can."

And so Dennis Quilley found himself helping to plot the murder of a woman he'd never met with a man he didn't even particularly like. Later, when he analyzed his reasons for playing along, he realized that that was exactly what he had been doing—playing. It had been a game, a cerebral puzzle, just like thinking up a plot for a book, and he never, at first, gave a thought to real murder, real blood, real death.

Peplow took a handkerchief from his top pocket and wiped the thin film of sweat from his brow. "You don't know how happy this makes me, Mr. Quilley. At last, I have a chance. My life hasn't amounted to much, and I don't suppose it ever will. But at least I might find some peace and quiet in my final years. I'm not a well man." He placed one hand solemnly over his chest. "Ticker. Not fair, is it? I've never smoked, I hardly drink, and I'm only fifty-three. But the doctor has promised me a few years yet if I live right. All I want is to be left alone with my books and my garden."

"Tell me about your wife," Quilley prompted.

Peplow's expression darkened. "She's a cruel and selfish woman," he said. "And she's messy, she never does anything around the place. Too busy watching those damn soap operas on television day and night. She cares about nothing but her own comfort, and she never overlooks an opportunity to nag me or taunt me. If I try to escape to my collection, she mocks me and calls me dull and boring. I'm not even safe from her in my garden. I realize I have no imagination, Mr. Quilley, and perhaps even less courage, but even a man like me deserves some peace in his life, don't you think?"

Quilley had to admit that the woman really did sound awful—worse than any he had known, and he had met some shrews in his time. He had never had much use for women, except for occasional sex in his younger days. Even that had become sordid, and now he stayed away from them as much as possible. He found, as he listened, that he could summon up remarkable sympathy for Peplow's position.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't really know. That's why I wrote to you. I was hoping you might be able to help with some ideas. Your books . . . you seem to know so much."

"In my books," Quilley said, "the murderer always gets caught."

"Well, yes," said Peplow, "of course. But that's because the genre demands it, isn't it? I mean, your Inspector Baldry is much smarter than any real policeman. I'm sure if you'd made him a criminal, he would always get away."

There was no arguing with that, Quilley thought. "How do you want to do it?" he asked. "A domestic accident? Electric shock, say? Gadget in the bathtub? She must have a hair curler or a dryer?"

Peplow shook his head, eyes tightly closed. "Oh no," he whispered, "I couldn't. I couldn't do anything like that. No more than I could bear the sight of her blood."

"How's her health?"

"Unfortunately," said Peplow, "she seems obscenely robust."

"How old is she?"

"Forty-nine."

"Any bad habits?"

"Mr. Quilley, my wife has nothing *but* bad habits. The only thing she won't tolerate is drink, for some reason, and I don't think she has other men—though that's probably because nobody will have her."

"Does she smoke?"

"Like a chimney."

Quilley shuddered. "How long?"

"Ever since she was a teenager, I think. Before I met her."

"Does she exercise?"

"Never."

"What about her weight, her diet?"

"Well, you might not call her fat, but you'd be generous in saying she was full-figured. She eats too much junk food. I've always said that. And eggs. She loves bacon and eggs for breakfast. And she's always stuffing herself with cream cakes and tarts."

"Hmmm," said Quilley, taking a sip of Amstel. "She sounds like a prime candidate for a heart attack."

"But it's me who—" Peplow stopped as comprehension dawned. "I see. Yes, I see. You mean one could be *induced?*"

"Quite. Do you think you could manage that?"

"Well, I could if I didn't have to be there to watch. But I don't know how."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Poison."

"I don't know anything about poison."

"Never mind. Give me a few days to look into it. I'll give you advice, remember, but that's as far as it goes."

"Understood."

Quilley smiled. "Good. Another beer?"

"No, I'd better not. She'll be able to smell this one on my breath and I'll be in for it already. I'd better go."

Quilley looked at his watch. Two-thirty. He could have done with another Amstel, but he didn't want to stay there by himself. Besides, at three it would be time to meet his agent at the Four Seasons, and there he would have the opportunity to drink as much as he wanted. To pass the time, he could browse in Edwards Books & Art. "Fine," he said, "I'll go down with you."

Outside, on the hot, busy street, they shook hands and agreed to meet in a week's time on the back patio of the Madison Avenue Pub. It wouldn't do to be seen together twice in the same place.

Quilley stood on the corner of Bloor and Avenue Road among the camera-clicking tourists and watched Peplow walk off towards the St. George subway station. Now that their meeting was over and the spell was broken, he wondered again what the hell he was doing helping this pathetic little man. It certainly wasn't altruism. Perhaps the challenge appealed to him; after all, people climb mountains just because they're there.

And then there was Peplow's mystery collection. There was just a chance that it might contain an item of great interest to Quilley, and that Peplow might be grateful enough to part with it.

Wondering how to approach the subject at their next meeting, Quilley wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and walked towards the bookshop.

Atropine, hyoscyamine, belladonna . . . Quilley flipped through Dreisbach's *Handbook of Poisoning* one evening at the cottage. Poison seemed to have gone out of fashion these days, and he had only used it in one of his novels, about six years ago. That had been the old standby, cyanide, with its familiar smell of bitter almonds that he had so often read about but never experienced. The small black handbook had sat on his shelf gathering dust ever since.

Writing a book, of course, one could generally skip over the problems of acquiring the stuff—give the killer a job as a pharma-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cist or in a hospital dispensary, for example. In real life, getting one's hands on poison might prove more difficult.

So far, he had read through the sections on agricultural poisons, household hazards, and medicinal poisons. The problem was that whatever Peplow used had to be easily available. Prescription drugs were out. Even if Peplow could persuade a doctor to give him barbiturates, for example, the prescription would be on record and any death in the household would be regarded as suspicious. Barbiturates wouldn't do, anyway, and nor would such common products as paint thinner, insecticides, and weed killers—they didn't reproduce the symptoms of a heart attack.

Near the back of the book was a list of poisonous plants that shocked Quilley by its sheer length. He hadn't known just how much deadliness there was lurking in fields, gardens, and woods. Rhubarb leaves contained oxalic acid, for example, and caused nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. The bark, wood, leaves, or seeds of the yew had a similar effect. Boxwood leaves and twigs caused convulsions; celandine could bring about a coma; hydrangeas contained cyanide; and laburnums brought on irregular pulse, delirium, twitching, and unconsciousness. And so the list went on—lupins, mistletoe, sweet peas, rhododendron—a poisoner's delight. Even the beautiful poinsettia, which brightened up so many Toronto homes each Christmas, could cause gastroenteritis. Most of these plants were easy to get hold of, and in many cases the active ingredients could be extracted simply by soaking or boiling in water.

It wasn't long before Quilley found what he was looking for. Beside "Oleander," the note read, "See *digitalis,* 374." And there it was, set out in detail. Digitalis occurred in all parts of the common foxglove, which grew on waste ground and woodland slopes, and flowered from June to September. Acute poisoning would bring about death from ventricular fibrillation. No doctor would consider an autopsy if Peplow's wife appeared to die of a heart attack, given her habits, especially if Peplow fed her a few smaller doses first to establish the symptoms.

Quilley set aside the book. It was already dark outside, and the downpour that the humid, cloudy day had been promising had just begun. Rain slapped against the asphalt roof tiles, gurgled down the drainpipe, and pattered on the leaves of the overhanging trees. In the background, it hissed as it fell on the lake. Distant

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

flashes of lightning and deep rumblings of thunder warned of the coming storm.

Happy with his solitude and his cleverness, Quilley linked his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair. Out back, he heard the rustling of a small animal making its way through the undergrowth—a raccoon, perhaps, or even a skunk. When he closed his eyes, he pictured all the trees, shrubs, and wildflowers around the cottage and marveled at what deadly potential so many of them contained.

The sun blazed down on the back patio of the Madison, a small garden protected from the wind by high fences. Quilley wore his sunglasses and nursed a pint of Conner's Ale. The place was packed. Skilled and pretty waitresses came and went, trays laden with baskets of chicken wings and golden pints.

The two of them sat out of the way at a white table in a corner by the metal fire escape. A striped parasol offered some protection, but the sun was still too hot and bright. Peplow's wife must have given him hell about drinking the last time, because today he had ordered only a Coke.

"It was easy," Quilley said. "You could have done it yourself. The only setback was that foxgloves don't grow wild here like they do in England. But you're a gardener; you grow them."

Peplow shook his head and smiled. "It's the gift of clever people like yourself to make difficult things seem easy. I'm not particularly resourceful, Mr. Quilley. Believe me, I wouldn't have known where to start. I had no idea that such a book existed, but you did, because of your art. Even if I had known, I'd hardly have dared buy it or take it out of the library for fear that someone would remember. But you've had your copy for years. A simple tool of the trade. No, Mr. Quilley, please don't underestimate your contribution. I was a desperate man. Now you've given me a chance at freedom. If there's anything at all I can do for you, please don't hesitate to say. I'd consider it an honor."

"This collection of yours," Quilley said. "What does it consist of?"

"British and Canadian crime fiction, mostly. I don't like to boast, but it's a very good collection. Try me. Go on, just mention a name."

"E. C. R. Lorac."

"About twenty of the Inspector MacDonalds. First editions, mint condition."

"Anne Hocking?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Everything but *Night's Candles.*"

"Trotton?"

Peplow raised his eyebrows. "Good Lord, that's an obscure one. Do you know, you're the first person I've come across who's ever mentioned that."

"Do you have it?"

"Oh yes." Peplow smiled smugly. "X. J. Trotton, *Signed in Blood,* published 1942. It turned up in a pile of junk I bought at an auction some years ago. It's rare, but not very valuable. Came out in Britain during the war and probably died an immediate death. It was his only book, as far as I can make out, and there is no biographical information. Perhaps it was a pseudonym for someone famous?"

Quilley shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know. Have you read it?"

"Good Lord, no! I don't read them. It could damage the spines. Many of them are fragile. Anything I want to read—like your books—I buy in paperback."

"Mr. Peplow," Quilley said slowly, "you asked if there was anything you could do for me. As a matter of fact, there *is* something you can give me for my services."

"Yes?"

"The Trotton."

Peplow frowned and pursed his thin lips. "Why on earth . . . ?"

"For my own collection, of course. I'm especially interested in the war period."

Peplow smiled. "Ah! So that's how you knew so much about them? I'd no idea you were a collector, too."

Quilley shrugged modestly. He could see Peplow struggling, visualizing the gap in his collection. But finally the poor man decided that the murder of his wife was more important to him than an obscure mystery novel. "Very well," he said gravely. "I'll mail it to you."

"How can I be sure . . . ?"

Peplow looked offended. "I'm a man of my word, Mr. Quilley. A bargain is a bargain." He held out his hand. "Gentleman's agreement."

"All right." Quilley believed him. "You'll be in touch, when it's done?"

"Yes. Perhaps a brief note in with the Trotton, if you can wait that long. Say two or three weeks?"

"Fine. I'm in no hurry."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Quilley hadn't examined his motives since the first meeting, but he had realized, as he passed on the information and instructions, that it was the challenge he responded to more than anything else. For years he had been writing crime novels, and in providing Peplow with the means to kill his slatternly, overbearing wife, Quilley had derived some vicarious pleasure from the knowledge that he—Inspector Baldry's creator—could bring off in real life what he had always been praised for doing in fiction.

Quilley also knew that there were no real detectives who possessed Baldry's curious mixture of intellect and instinct. Most of them were thick plodders, and they would never realize that dull Mr. Peplow had murdered his wife with a bunch of foxgloves, of all things. Nor would they ever know that the brains behind the whole affair had been none other than his, Dennis Quilley's.

The two men drained their glasses and left together. The corner of Bloor and Spadina was busy with tourists and students lining up for charcoal-grilled hot dogs from the street vendor. Peplow turned towards the subway and Quilley wandered among the artsy crowd and the roller-bladers on Bloor Street West for a while, then he settled at an open-air café over a daiquiri and a slice of kiwi-fruit cheesecake to read the *Globe and Mail.*

Now, he thought as he sipped his drink and turned to the arts section, all he had to do was wait. One day soon, a small package would arrive for him. Peplow would be free of his wife, and Quilley would be the proud owner of one of the few remaining copies of X. J. Trotton's one and only mystery novel, *Signed in Blood.*

Three weeks passed, and no package arrived. Occasionally, Quilley thought of Mr. Peplow and wondered what had become of him. Perhaps he had lost his nerve after all. That wouldn't be surprising. Quilley knew that he would have no way of finding out what had happened if Peplow chose not to contact him again. He didn't know where the man lived or where he worked. He didn't even know if Peplow was his real name. Still, he thought, it was best that way. No contact. Even the Trotton wasn't worth being involved in a botched murder for.

Then, at ten o'clock one warm Tuesday morning in September, the doorbell chimed. Quilley looked at his watch and frowned. Too early for the postman. Sighing, he pressed the SAVE command on his PC and walked down to answer the door. A stranger stood there, an overweight woman in a yellow polka-dot dress with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

short sleeves and a low neck. She had piggy eyes set in a round face, and dyed red hair that looked limp and lifeless after a cheap perm. She carried an imitation crocodile-skin handbag.

Quilley must have stood there looking puzzled for too long. The woman's eyes narrowed and her rosebud mouth tightened so much that white furrows radiated from the red circle of her lips.

"May I come in?" she asked.

Stunned, Quilley stood back and let her enter. She walked straight over to a wicker armchair and sat down. The basketwork creaked under her. From there, she surveyed the room, with its waxed parquet floor, stone fireplace, and antique Ontario furniture.

"Nice," she said, clutching her purse on her lap. Quilley sat down opposite her. Her dress was a size too small and the material strained over her red, fleshy upper arms and pinkish bosom. The hem rode up as she crossed her legs, exposing a wedge of fat, mottled thigh. Primly, she pulled it down again over her dimpled knees.

"I'm sorry to appear rude," said Quilley, regaining his composure, "but who the hell are you?"

"My name is Peplow," the woman said. "Mrs. Gloria Peplow. I'm a widow."

Quilley felt a tingling sensation along his spine, like he always did when fear began to take hold of him.

He frowned and said, "I'm afraid I don't know you, do I?"

"We've never met," the woman replied, "but I think you knew my husband."

"I don't recall any Peplow. Perhaps you're mistaken?"

Gloria Peplow shook her head and fixed him with her piggy eyes. He noticed that they were black, or as near as. "I'm not mistaken, Mr. Quilley. You didn't only know my husband, you also plotted with him to murder me."

Quilley flushed and jumped to his feet. "That's absurd! Look, if you've come here to make insane accusations like that, you'd better go." He stood like an ancient statue, one hand pointing dramatically towards the door.

Mrs. Peplow smirked. "Oh, sit down. You look very foolish standing there like that."

Quilley continued to stand. "This is *my* home, Mrs. Peplow, and I insist that you leave. Now!"

Mrs. Peplow sighed and opened the gilded plastic clasp on her purse. She took out a Shoppers Drug Mart envelope, picked out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

two color photographs, and dropped them next to the Wedgwood dish on the antique wine table by her chair. Leaning forward, Quilley could see clearly what they were: One showed him standing with Peplow outside the Park Plaza, and the other caught the two of them talking outside the Scotiabank at Bloor and Spadina. Mrs. Peplow flipped the photos over, and Quilley saw that they had been date-stamped by the processors.

"You met with my husband at least twice to help him plan my death."

"That's ridiculous. I do remember him, now I've seen the picture. I just couldn't recollect his name. He was a fan. We talked about mystery novels. I'm very sorry to hear that he's passed away."

"He had a heart attack, Mr. Quilley, and now I'm all alone in the world."

"I'm very sorry, but I don't see . . ."

Mrs. Peplow waved his protests aside. Quilley noticed the dark sweat stain on the tight material around her armpit. She fumbled with the catch on her purse again and brought out a pack of Export Lights and a book of matches.

"I don't allow smoking in my house," Quilley said. "It doesn't agree with me."

"Pity," she said, lighting the cigarette and dropping the spent match in the Wedgwood bowl. She blew a stream of smoke directly at Quilley, who coughed and fanned it away.

"Listen to me, Mr. Quilley," she said, "and listen good. My husband might have been stupid, but I'm not. He was not only a pathetic and boring little man, he was also an open book. Don't ask me why I married him. He wasn't even much of a man, if you know what I mean. Do you think I haven't known for some time that he was thinking of ways to get rid of me? I wouldn't give him a divorce because the one thing he did—the *only* thing he did—was provide for me, and he didn't even do that very well. I'd have got half if we divorced, but half of what he earned isn't enough to keep a bag lady. I'd have had to go to work, and I don't like that idea. So I watched him. He got more and more desperate, more and more secretive. When he started looking smug, I knew he was up to something."

"Mrs. Peplow," Quilley interrupted, "this is all very well, but I don't see what it has to do with me. You come in here and pollute my home with smoke, then you start telling me some fairy tale

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about your husband, a man I met casually once or twice. I'm busy, Mrs. Peplow, and quite frankly I'd rather you left and let me get back to work."

"I'm sure you would." She flicked a column of ash into the Wedgwood bowl. "As I was saying, I knew he was up to something, so I started following him. I thought he might have another woman, unlikely as it seemed, so I took my camera along. I wasn't really surprised when he headed for the Park Plaza instead of going back to the office after lunch one day. I watched the elevator go up to the nineteenth floor, the bar, so I waited across the street in the crowd for him to come out again. As you know, I didn't have to wait very long. He came out with you. And it was just as easy the next time."

"I've already told you, Mrs. Peplow, he was a mystery buff, a fellow collector, that's all—"

"Yes, yes, I know he was. Him and his stupid catalogues and collection. Still," she mused, "it had its uses. That's how I found out who you were. I'd seen your picture on the book covers, of course. If I may say so, it does you more than justice." She looked him up and down as if he were a side of beef hanging in a butcher's window. He cringed. "As I was saying, my husband was obvious. I knew he must be chasing you for advice. He spends so much time escaping to his garden or his little world of books that it was perfectly natural he would go to a mystery novelist for advice rather than to a real criminal. I imagine you were a bit more accessible, too. A little flattery, and you were hooked. Just another puzzle for you to work on."

"Look, Mrs. Peplow—"

"Let me finish." She ground out her cigarette butt in the bowl. "Foxgloves, indeed! Do you think he could manage to brew up a dose of digitalis without leaving traces all over the place? Do you know what he did the first time? He put just enough in my Big Mac to make me a bit nauseous and make my pulse race, but he left the leaves and stems in the garbage! Can you believe that? Oh, I became very careful in my eating habits after that, Mr. Quilley. Anyway, your little plan didn't work. I'm here and he's dead."

Quilley paled. "My God, you killed him, didn't you?"

"He was the one with the bad heart, not me." She lit another cigarette.

"You can hardly blackmail me for plotting with your husband to kill you when *he's* the one who's dead," said Quilley. "And as for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evidence, there's nothing. No, Mrs. Peplow, I think you'd better go, and think yourself lucky I don't call the police."

Mrs. Peplow looked surprised. "What are you talking about? I have no intention of blackmailing you for plotting to kill me."

"Then what . . . ?"

"Mr. Quilley, my husband was blackmailing you. That's why *you* killed *him.*"

Quilley slumped back in his chair. "I what?"

She took a sheet of paper from her purse and passed it over to him. On it were just two words: "Trotton—Quilley." He recognized the neat handwriting. "That's a photocopy," Mrs. Peplow went on. "The original's where I found it, slipped between the pages of a book called *Signed in Blood* by X. J. Trotton. Do you know that book, Mr. Quilley?"

"Vaguely. I've heard of it."

"Oh, have you? It might also interest you to know that along with that book and the slip of paper, locked away in my husband's files, is a copy of your own first novel. I put it there."

Quilley felt the room spinning around him. "I . . . I . . ." Peplow had given him the impression that Gloria was stupid, but that was turning out to be far from the truth.

"My husband's only been dead for two days. If the doctors look, they'll *know* that he's been poisoned. For a start, they'll find high levels of potassium, and then they'll discover *eosinophilia.* Do you know what eosinophils are, Mr. Quilley? I looked them up. They're a kind of white blood cell, and you find lots of them around if there's been any allergic reaction or inflammation. If I was to go to the police and say I'd been suspicious about my husband's behavior over the past few weeks, that I had followed him and photographed him with you, and if they were to find the two books and the slip of paper in his files . . . Well, I think you know what they'd make of it, don't you? Especially if I told them he came home feeling ill after a lunch with you."

"It's not fair," Quilley said, banging his fist on the chair arm. "It's just not bloody fair."

"Life rarely is. But the police aren't to know how stupid and unimaginative my husband was. They'll just look at the note, read the books, and assume he was blackmailing you." She laughed. "Even if Frank had read the Trotton book, I'm sure he'd only have noticed an 'influence,' at the most. But you and I know what really went on, don't we? It happens more often than people think. A few

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

years ago I read in the newspaper about similarities between a book by Colleen McCullough and *The Blue Castle* by Lucy Maud Montgomery. I'd say that was a bit obvious, wouldn't you? It was much easier in your case, much less dangerous. You were very clever, Mr. Quilley. You found an obscure novel, and you didn't only adapt the plot for your own first book, you even stole the character of your series detective. There was some risk involved, certainly, but not much. Your book is better, without a doubt. You have some writing talent, which X. J. Trotton completely lacked. But he did have the germ of an original idea, and it wasn't lost on you, was it?"

Quilley groaned. Thirteen solid police procedurals, twelve of them all his own work, but the first, yes, a deliberate adaptation of a piece of ephemeral trash. He had seen what Trotton could have done and had done it himself. Serendipity, or so it had seemed when he found the dusty volume in a secondhand bookshop in Victoria years ago. All he had had to do was change the setting from London to Toronto, alter the names, and set about improving upon the original. And now . . . ? The hell of it was that he would have been perfectly safe without the damn book. He had simply given in to the urge to get his hands on Peplow's copy and destroy it. It wouldn't have mattered, really. *Signed in Blood* would have remained unread on Peplow's shelf. If only the bloody fool hadn't written that note. . . .

"Even if the police can't make a murder charge stick," Mrs. Peplow went on, "I think your reputation would suffer if this got out. Oh, the great reading public might not care. Perhaps a trial would even increase your sales—you know how ghoulish people are—but the plagiarism would at the very least lose you the respect of your peers. I don't think your agent and publisher would be very happy, either. Am I making myself clear?"

Pale and sweating, Quilley nodded. "How much?" he whispered.

"Pardon?"

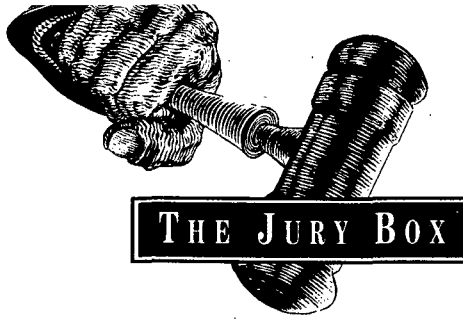
"I said how much. How much do you want to keep quiet?"

"Oh, it's not your money I'm after, Mr. Quilley, or may I call you Dennis? Well, not *only* money, anyway. I'm a widow now. I'm all alone in the world."

She looked around the room, her piggy eyes glittering, then gave Quilley one of the most disgusting looks he'd ever had in his life.

"I've always fancied living near the lake," she said, reaching for another cigarette. "Live here alone, do you?" ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

Thomas H. Cook may be the best American writer of crime fiction currently practicing. Stress the word American, for his range of locales is unusually varied, from New York in his first novel *Blood Innocents* (1980) and others to Salt Lake City in *Tabernacle* (1983), Atlanta in *Sacrificial Ground* (1988), Birmingham in *Streets of Fire* (1989), and, in his two most recent novels, small towns on Cape Cod and in Alabama. Though not inclined to repeat himself, Cook employs similar structures in 1995's recently reprinted *Breakheart Hill* (Bantam paperback) and his newest novel, reviewed below. In each case, the narrator is an adult recalling a traumatic incident from his school days; the circumstances are hinted at and gradually revealed; the narrator has a guilty secret, mysterious until near the end of the book; there are flashbacks to trial transcripts; an interesting father-son relationship is explored; and the not-always-linear narrative style keeps the reader clear on the frequent time shifts. Each book can be called a detective story, but the detective is the reader, who may not foresee the surprises but can trace the fairly-laid clues when the truth is finally revealed. Breakheart Hill, in which a small-town Alabama doctor looks back to events of the early sixties, is an outstanding novel, but its successor is even better.

***** Thomas H. Cook: *The Chatham School Affair,* Bantam, $22.95. Narrator Henry Griswald recalls the twenties when he was a pupil in his father's Cape Cod school and new art teacher Elizabeth Channing, a world traveler and thus an exotic figure, took up her duties. Any more information would endan-

©1996 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ger the reader's pleasure. Suffice it to say the elegiac prose is beautiful and the gradual unraveling of the truth masterfully accomplished. Though Cook is one of a kind, the closest comparison might be the brilliant British author Peter Dickinson.

**** Steven Saylor: *A Murder on the Appian Way,* St. Martin's, $23.95. Gordianus the Finder and son Eco investigate the murder of Clodius, seemingly by the forces of political rival Milo, on the Roman Empire's most famous highway. The fifth entry confirms the Gordianus saga's stature among the best historical series—and it is the best to use an ancient Roman background. (Saylor is among the distinguished lineup represented in the *EQMM* anthology of historical mysteries *Once Upon a Crime II* [St. Martin's, $21.95], edited by Janet Hutchings.)

*** Vincent Starrett: *The Eleventh Juror and Other Crime Classics,* Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library (order from The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, George A. Vanderburgh, P.O. Box 204, 420 Owen Sound Street, Shelburne, Ontario, Canada LON 1SO); $30 Canadian, $24 U.S. Starrett, best remembered for the classic study *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes,* was also a prolific writer of detective and crime fiction, especially at shorter lengths. This and the book that follows are part of a projected 22-volume Vincent Starrett Memorial Library. Both are edited and introduced by Starrett biographer Peter Ruber, with more new collections to come. The famous title tale and the great Sherlock Holmes pastiche "The Adventure of the Unique Hamlet" are followed by eight more non-series tales of agreeably old-fashioned detection and espionage, all but three previously uncollected.

*** Vincent Starrett, *The New Adventures of Jimmie Lavender,* Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library (order, see above), $30 Canadian, $24 U.S. Chicago sleuth Lavender, named after a turn-of-the-century Cubs pitcher, was Starrett's effort at an American Sherlock Holmes. *The Case Book of Jimmie Lavender* (1944) gathered a dozen stories; the present volume has twelve more, all but one ("Out There in the Dark" from Starrett's 1930 volume *The Blue Door)* previously uncollected. Charmingly written and cunningly constructed, the stories sometimes exist at an extra remove from reality, in the manner of old radio mysteries. Readers who enjoy the fair-play detective novels-in-miniature Edward D. Hoch contributes to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EQMM should also like the Lavender stories. (Apart from an appalling lack of proofreading, the failure to provide dates and other original publication information in both these volumes is my only complaint to the editor and publisher.)

*** John Mortimer: *Rumpole and the Angel of Death,* Viking, $22.95. Horace Rumpole, ageing junior barrister, is in good form in six new stories. Among the most quotable characters in mystery fiction, the Old Bailey veteran offers this gem early in "Rumpole and the Rights of Man": ". . . I have reached the age when every day must be savoured and cherished. In fact, the years flash by like stations at which the train doesn't stop . . ."

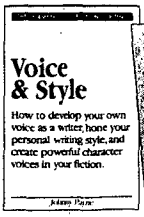
** Mel D. Ames: *Tales of Titillation and Terror,* Mosaic Press, 85 River Rock Drive, Suite 202, Buffalo, NY 14207; $12.95 U.S., $15.95 Canadian. Ames is an enthusiastic and enjoyable throwback to the the pulp fictioneers, as shown in the lead story, "The Embryo," a mix of gothic suspense, horror, s.f., fantasy, and eroticism that might have been at home in *Spicy Mystery.* The tales that follow offer a similar combination of over-the-top prose and carefully crafted plot stunts.

** David Champion: *Nobody Roots for Goliath,* Allen A. Knoll Publishers, 200 West Victoria Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101; $22.95. The second novel about flamboyant California lawyer Bomber Hanson takes him to Pennsylvania, where he represents a dying Pennsylvania farmer with eleven daughters in a suit against a large and powerful (not to mention, sneaky and devious) tobacco company. Though the mystery element is slight, the narrative gathers considerable steam after a fairly unpromising start. The courtroom scenes are good, but the reader must suffer the client's all-too-precious family and a painful romantic subplot involving narrator-legman Tod Hanson, Bomber's composer son (he's working on something called a "concerto for orchestra"), who stutters only when talking to his father.

Among the reprints is one of the finest (and most unusual) crime novels of 1995: Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* (Plume, $10.95), which puts the reader inside the head of a psychopathic serial killer, not for brief intervals but for the whole narrative.

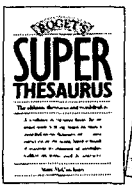
Larry Beinhart's *How to Write a Mystery* (Ballantine, $11) is full of good advice for prospective writers and so entertainingly written you might enjoy it even if writing a mystery is the furthest thing from your mind.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

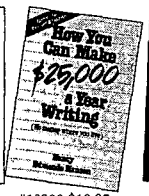

Voice
& Style
How to develop your own voice as a writer, hone your personal writing style, and create powerful character voices in your fiction.

#10452 $15.99

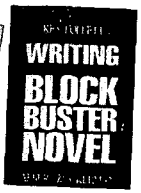
#10336 $19.95



#10424 $22.99

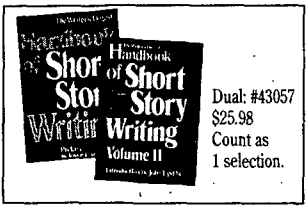


#10328 $18.95



#10393 $18.99

#48000 $17.99



Dual: #43057
$25.98
Count as
1 selection.

#10075 $18.99

#10025 $19.99

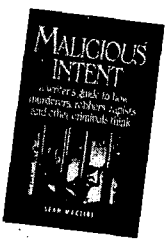
#10473 $15.99 pb

#10325 $15.99 pb

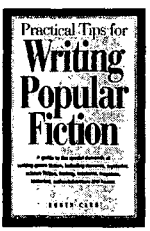
#10286 $18.99

#10072 $18.99

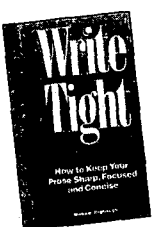
#10463 $17.99



#10413 $16.99 pb



#10313 $17.95

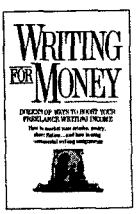


#10360 $16.99

#10366 $17.99

#10290 $13.99 pb

#10414 $16.99 pb



#10425 $17.99

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- Discounts from 15-65% on every book you buy!
- FREE Bonus Books!
- FREE postage & handling on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- Satisfaction Guaranteed 100%!

HOW THE CLUB WORKS

You'll receive the *BULLETIN* every four weeks, about 14 times a year, featuring a Main Selection and 100 or more of the newest and best writing instruction books. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing, and it will be sent automatically. If you want a different book, or want nothing that month, you'll always have at least 10 days to decide and notify the Club by returning your Selection Card. If late delivery of the *BULLETIN* should ever cause you to receive a book you don't want, you may return it at club expense. As a new member you agree to purchase one book from the *BULLETIN* within the next six months; after that, you may cancel your membership at any time. Each time you buy a book, your membership will be renewed for six months from the purchase date.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TAKE 2 BOOKS

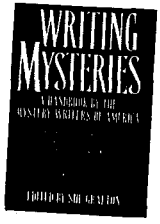
FREE

WITH 1 FOR JUST $9.95 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!

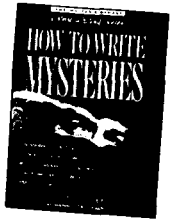
#10349 $18.95

#10455 $19.99

#48003 $17.99



#10286 $18.99



#10129 $14.95

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ **YES!** I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book #_____ **FREE**
and my second FREE book #_____ **FREE**
with my third book #_____ for only.....$ 9.95
plus postage and handling.....$ 5.61
all for just.....$ 15.56
(Payment must accompany order. Ohio residents add 55¢ tax; Canadians add $1.09 GST.)

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ Exp. Date: _____

I have read the membership plan and agree to buy 1 more book in the next 6 months.

Signature_____
required on all certificates

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____ ZIP_____

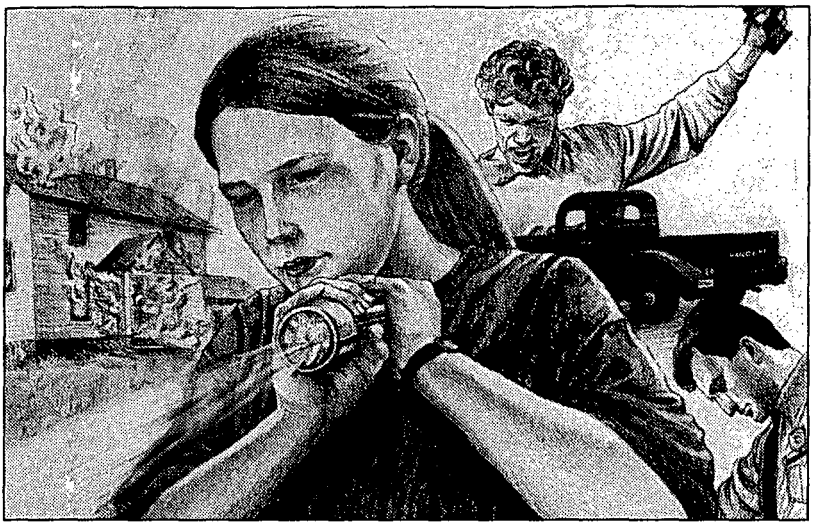
Writer's Digest BOOK CLUB

Offer good for new members in U.S. and Canada only. U.S. funds only. Allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

P.O. Box 12948 Cincinnati, Ohio 45212-0948

EQ24

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Laurie Harden

THE CLOSING CIRCLE

by Ed Gorman

That morning in social studies class, Mr. Prescott said that he wanted each student to write a one-page essay about the AIDS hospice being burned down the week before. One man had died in the fire.

When Mr. Prescott gave out the assignment, several of the twelfth-grade boys exchanged smirks. A lot of the parents in the small town of Ainsworth hadn't wanted the state-run facility there in the first place. Nobody was supposed to have been in the hospice that night, anyway. The patient had arrived a day early, and so the doctor had let him stay the night.

"Did I say something funny, Richie?" Mr. Prescott said. He was the assistant football coach, had played first-string halfback at the university, and was known to have an extremely bad temper.

The smirk died quickly on Richie Hayworth's face.

"No, sir, you didn't say anything funny."

©1996 by Ed Gorman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Then why were you smiling?" Richie glanced at a couple of his friends then back at Mr. Prescott.

"Well," Richie said, "because of who that guy at the hospice was."

"Who was he?"

"Well, you know, Mr. Prescott. A fag."

Half the class laughed out loud. It was like the day Mr. Prescott discussed how some people were trying to ban *Huckleberry Finn* because of the expression "Nigger Jim." "Fag" was an expression just like that.

"Richie, let me ask you a question."

"All right."

"Are you sorry that somebody burned the hospice down?"

Richie glanced at his friends again.

"My dad said they didn't belong here," Richie said after a time. "My dad said they shouldn't have used Ainsworth to experiment on."

Richie obviously kept waiting for Mr. Prescott to get angry but he didn't. He just said, "Class, how many of you feel that the state shouldn't have set up that hospice here in the first place?"

Mr. Prescott counted the hands. Of a class of twenty-three students, eighteen boys and girls put their arms up.

"All right. Then let me ask you one more question, class. How many of you think it was a good thing that the hospice was burned down?"

Six or seven hands tentatively started to rise but then paused midway and came back down.

Nobody had the nerve to be quite that honest.

Mr. Prescott looked them over, as if assessing each of them individually, and then said, "I'm going to give each of you an 'A' for your papers."

Smiles.

Like several of Ed Gorman's previous works for *EQMM*, "The Closing Circle" will appear in book form after its publication here. Interested readers may find it, and a selection of stories by other crime writers, in *Heartland*, edited by Peter Crowther, to be published by White Wolf Publishing in early 1997. ¶

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But there's one thing you have to do for me. You have to be honest in your papers, all right?"

"That's all?" Richie said.

"That's all, Richie. Just put down your honest thoughts about the hospice and the people in it and the fire last week. And tell me what you really feel."

The bell rang ending the school day, inviting the kids outside to the warm Indian-summer afternoon. The trees in the hills had just started to turn, and the farmers on their green John Deere combines had just started to harvest, and in the new Wal-Mart Halloween costumes had just appeared.

A few moments later, all the students but one had hurried out of Mr. Prescott's room.

Alison James always stayed a few minutes late to plan out her studies for the evening. Her father Bill was the local chief of police and as such was a very busy man who needed Alison around the house most of the time. Alison and Bill were still adjusting to the loss of Diane, her mother, his wife, a year ago from heart disease. One time Alison would be crying and unable to get much done; the next time Bill would be crying and unable to get much done. They took care of each other. Alison, thankful she'd taken that Home Ec course in ninth grade, also took care of the house, which included the cooking. They had some pretty good jokes about some of the first meals she'd made, meals not even Roger, their beagle, would eat, and Roger had been known to eat just about everything. In order to get things done, however, Alison had been forced to become a "lister," a person who made lists of things to do and who ran her life according to those lists.

There in Mr. Prescott's class, then, Alison finished her list for tonight.

When she was finished—glad she didn't have to stop by the library, eager instead to stop by the police station and see her father—she walked to the front of the room.

Just as she reached the door, Mr. Prescott said, "Hold on a second, Alison, I'll walk out with you."

The walls of Wilson Senior High were covered with framed graduating-class photographs dating back to 1925. It was like being in some kind of human museum. All the different hair styles and clothing styles, from flappers to hippies. The only thing that didn't change was the faces. Good girls, bad girls, smart boys,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dumb boys, tough boys, lonely girls . . . no matter what the fashion, human beings always stayed the same.

If she'd been alone, Alison would have done more than glance at the photos that ran along the wall above the long green line of lockers. She would have doted on a few of them individually, trying to imagine what this girl from 1938 had been like, or this boy from 1943.

But today she wasn't alone. She was with Mr. Prescott.

"I just wanted to ask you how the investigation's going," Mr. Prescott said. "I thought maybe your dad had said something to you."

"Nothing really specific," she said. "But he's been putting in a lot of hours with the SBI people." The State Bureau of Investigation had arrived there shortly after the man's corpse had been pulled from the burned-out hospice that had been housed in a very old Colonial-style house.

"This couldn't have come at a worse time," Mr. Prescott said. He shook his head. "Next week I'm scheduled to go to the state capitol and make a presentation for Ainsworth. We're trying to get the state American Legion convention here next year. The kind of publicity we've been getting, the hospice and all, I mean, nobody'll want to be associated with us."

"I just feel sorry for the man who died," Alison said.

Mr. Prescott looked over at her and smiled. "The mouths of babes."

"Pardon me?"

"You just very nicely pointed out what a jerk I'm being," Mr. Prescott said. "Believe it or not, Alison, I really *am* horrified at what happened. I mean, I'm not especially fond of homosexuals but I suppose they can't help it. And whatever I think of them, they *are* human beings. I guess I got so caught up in all that convention stuff, I forgot all about the hospice for a minute there." This time his smile was bitter. "I sounded like Richie did in class, calling them 'fags.' He gets that from home, of course. They all do."

"They still shouldn't say it," Alison said. "And they should be mad about the hospice, no matter who was inside it. My dad's mad. The mayor was over last night and my dad promised that he wouldn't work on anything else till he got this figured out."

"Your dad's a good man. Not a lot of lawmen are as enlightened as he is, Alison. When the Steinmetzes moved in here and some people started saying anti-Semitic things, your dad was the first

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to stand up for them. Same with those two black families when the corn processing plant opened up out here. Your dad stood up for them, too. You may be too young to remember that."

"Oh no. I remember. He got that from my mom. She taught us both that, you know, about being nice to other people."

Alison couldn't help it, mentioning her mom filled her eyes with tears. Sometimes she'd go for days without crying; then suddenly, she'd cry at every memory.

They were on the first floor now, by the east doors. Alison could see the parking lot, all the students jubilant because it was Friday afternoon, and because there was a varsity football game tonight with a bonfire before and a dance after.

All her dad had been able to think about or talk about for days was the burning of the hospice and the murder of the man inside. She sensed that his job was in some jeopardy. He'd never much gotten along with the new mayor anyway.

All the stress and anxiety he was suffering . . . and the students were their usual noisy carefree selfish selves. It didn't seem fair, somehow.

"You be sure and say hello to your dad."

"I will."

"And tell him if he could make an arrest before next week, I'd really appreciate it." Mr. Prescott laughed, to show that he was joking.

But Alison knew better. He wasn't joking at all.

One hundred and fifty years ago the town had been thirty-six log cabins, three churches, two taverns, and a sawmill. Fifty years later, when the railroad had finally reached here, the town became the shipping point for many of the farms in this part of the state. While it never prospered the way Cedar Rapids, its neighbor to the south, did, or bloomed quite like Dubuque, which French trappers and riverboats had made an important stop, Ainsworth had electricity, telephones, and paved roads long before most other towns in the state.

Alison loved to walk the tree-shaded streets and search for artifacts of the old Ainsworth. If you looked hard you could still find a few hitching posts for horses and see the steel tracks of the horse-drawn trolley or one of the old ice wagons that used to visit each home in town.

There wasn't time for history today, however. Alison had been so caught up in homework last night that she'd forgotten to plan a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meal for tonight. She'd visit her father briefly, then drive over to Frank's Big-Valu supermarket. There was a chain supermarket but she didn't like to patronize it, seeing it as part of the horde of franchises—Pizza Hut, Taco John's, McDonald's, Arby's—that squatted all plastic and shiny on either end of the main drag and took all the business from the local downtown merchants.

She was a block from the police station when she saw her father's Pontiac, the chief's car, the one he got full use of as part of his job, come whipping out of the police garage next to the station. No siren, but he was driving fast. He'd put up his red emergency cherry on top of the car and it whipped around all red and official.

Another car pulled away from the curb in front of the station, made a quick U-turn, and followed the chief's car. This was a two-year-old gray Ford station wagon, the property of grumpy Doc Walters, the oldest physician in these parts and also the county coroner since Alison's father had been a boy.

Whatever was going on, it was obviously important, with both her father and Doc Walters involved.

And then the ambulance came shooting up the street, a block, block and a half behind them. This was the new white one that the city council had been so reluctant to invest in. Both her father and Doc Walters had had to put in half a dozen council appearances before the three men and one woman let the hospital buy it. There was a centennial coming up and they wanted to make sure they had plenty of money in the treasury. Her father still fumed about it: plenty of money for the town throwing a party for itself, but not enough money to save lives.

She stopped into the police station anyway.

As always, Sara Findley, the dispatcher, a bulky fiftyish woman with short gray hair, sat at the front desk. She alternated between communicating with the town's three squad cars and greeting the public at the front desk. Sara always wore a blue short-sleeved uniform shirt, even in blizzard weather, rolled up high to show off impressive biceps. Sara worked out every day with weights.

"Hey, kiddo," Sara said. She had lively blue eyes and a lively sense of humor. Dad always said she was the best worker he had. "You see all the ruckus?"

Alison nodded. "Where were they going?"

"They found Tom Shay dead out in his little house."

"Dead? Gee, he's only in his twenties."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sara made a gun of her finger and thumb. She put her finger to her temple and then simulated pulling the trigger. "Suicide."

"Oh God." Ever since her mother died, Alison had been painfully sensitive to the death of everything and everybody. She knew now that all forms of life, every single form in the universe, died. She was still struggling with that concept. She wanted to be innocent again, to not have such knowledge, but once you knew something like that you were forever changed.

"That isn't all," Sara said, leaning over the small switchboard she operated from her desk.

She was about to say more when a male voice behind Alison said, "You've got that skirt on again, Cousin. I'll bet half the boys at school were putting the moves on you today."

Mitch Powers. Tall. Blond. Handsome in a smirky, self-absorbed way. Two divorces, three kids, always behind in his child support. His specialty was the girls who worked out at the mall. They were out of high school but had decided against college. They spent all their money on clothes and makeup, and spent most of their time in local bars. Mitch Powers was one of their favorites. He was not only cute but he had that cop aura about him, too. Tough. Knowing. Able to break a few laws on the sly when he deemed it necessary.

But the worst thing about Mitch was that he was her father's first cousin and therefore also related to Alison, who had to try and be nice to him, which was difficult considering that Mitch was always hinting that when she got a few years older they should maybe go out sometime. She'd never told her father this because it would complicate his relationship with Mitch even more. Dad had lost his parents in a car accident when he was ten. Mitch's folks raised him. How could he possibly fire their son?

"You're not going out to Shay's place?" Sara said. Alison saw that it was a struggle for Sara to be nice to Mitch.

Mitch shook his head. "Chief told me to stick around here, in case something came up."

Right, Alison thought. In other words, Dad didn't want Mitch out there screwing things up. At a crime scene last year, just as Dad had been roping off the front yard, Mitch had come lumbering through and destroyed some critical pieces of evidence. Dad had sent Mitch twice to the police academy in Des Moines, but Mitch had apparently spent his time there chasing girls and getting drunk. One night he'd also been arrested for assault and battery but the chief in Des Moines had called Dad and they'd worked out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a deal whereby Mitch would plead to a lesser charge and pay a bigger fine.

"He was a friend of yours, wasn't he, Mitch?" Alison said, curious about Mitch's odd good mood, odd because he and Shay had been friends since grade school.

"Yeah, but I hadn't seen him much the last couple of years," Mitch said, his gaze shifting away from hers momentarily. "He was hittin' the sauce pretty good." He tapped the silver badge on his uniform shirt. "You wear a piece of tin like this, you have to be careful who you hang out with."

Alison caught Sara rolling her eyes. Shay had been a brawling drunk, known to bully people when he was drinking. But that was Mitch's reputation, too. In fact, most of the times Shay had gotten into real trouble, Mitch had been right there with him. Mitch was lying about Shay. Alison had seen them together plenty of times in the last few months. She wondered why Mitch would lie about it. Another thing was that Mitch had gone around town really stirring people up about the hospice. —"They want to put all these fags out in a small town, give 'em fresh air while they're dying. Well, I don't want to give 'em any of *my* fresh air, I'll tell you that."

Mitch rested his hand on the powerful .357 cinched into his Sam Browne holster. "Well, I'd better get back there and see how things are going." He gave Alison another quick appraisal and obviously liked what he saw. "Can't wait for that eighteenth birthday of yours. Coming up next week, if I remember correctly, Cousin." He winked, the old swaggering Mitch once again, and then walked back down the hall. The offices were back there. A jail of eight cells was upstairs.

Alison tried to forget what he'd said about her turning eighteen. She used to look forward to growing up, but after her mother died and the hospice was burned down, the world of adults seemed terribly cruel and frightening.

"You should tell your dad, the way Mitch always comes on to you," Sara said.

"He'd just say that he was kidding. Dad always tries to believe everything Mitch tells him."

"Tell me about it," Sara said, just a hint of bitterness in her voice. Then: "Oh, I was going to tell you about the suicide note Shay left."

"What did it say?"

Sara leaned forward once again and said, "Guess why he killed himself?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Why?"

Sara stage-whispered now. "Shay was the one who burned the hospice and killed that guy. Said he didn't know anybody was in there and felt real bad about the guy dyin'."

"That's awful," Alison said. "The whole thing."

Alison leaned over and gathered up her schoolbooks, said goodbye to Sara, and went outdoors into the warm, hazy Indian-summer afternoon.

She'd walked a block when she heard a horn beep and turned to see that it was Grandad Powers in his tow truck. Grandad had his own auto repair shop and did a lot of towing as well. Technically, he wasn't her blood Grandad. Dad was actually his nephew, but after Dad's folks had died, Sam Powers and his wife raised Dad along with their son Mitch. The funny thing was, Alison had always had the secret feeling that Sam preferred Dad to Mitch.

She walked over to the truck.

"Get in. I'll give you a ride home," Grandad said.

Sam Powers was one of those spare but strong old men you see all over the Midwest. With his white hair and knowing but pleasant blue eyes, he'd always been Alison's favorite relative. Alison had a lot of great memories of riding around in the tow truck with him when she was a little girl. She'd loved watching him hook a car up to the crane in back and haul it off.

"How's that dad of yours doing?" Grandad said. "We were supposed to go bowling last week but then he called and canceled. Said he was too busy. Fine way to treat your pop." Then he gave her a sly grin.

"He's doing fine. How's Grandma?"

The truck bounced a little as it moved down the street. Grandad shifted gears. She could see he didn't want to talk about it especially. "Oh, you know, honey, one day she seems to be doing well and then the next—"

The only other time she'd seen tears in Grandad's eyes had been at her mother's funeral.

Alison changed the subject, wanting to get Grandad out of his sudden mood. "Did you hear about Shay?"

Grandad nodded. "I sure did. I hate to say it but I never cared much for that guy."

Grandad pulled in the driveway, right next to the side door of Alison's house.

"Grandma would like to get you and your dad and Mitch out to Sunday dinner here pretty soon. Tell him that, will you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She leaned over and kissed him. She could taste dried tears on his cheek.

"And tell him I know why he *really* canceled our bowling the other night." Grandad grinned. "He knew I'd beat his pants off."

"I love you, Grandad."

"I love you, too, Alison." He looked at her a long, sad moment and she thought he would cry again. "Your Grandma and I are so proud of you."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Tell Grandma I haven't forgotten about making that peanut brittle for her. I'll bring it over when I do."

Then she stood in the drive, waving goodbye to Grandad, the way she had when she was a little girl.

For dinner, she made a macaroni and cheese casserole, sliced fresh tomatoes, a spinach leaf salad, and a dessert of instant Jell-O and Cool Whip. Not a feast, certainly, but with whole wheat bread and low-fat margarine, a decent enough meal. As always, Dad said grace before they ate. Then he started eating. He always ate fast, like a kid, which she found cute. She could imagine him as a little boy, all big brown eyes and furrowed brow and straw-blond hair.

"Sara told me about Shay."

Dad nodded. Glanced at her. "That clears it up. The hospice, I mean." He put margarine on a piece of bread. "I don't think he meant to kill that guy, though. Nobody was supposed to be there until the morning. Shay figured the place was empty."

"He could be pretty mean."

Dad shook his head. His blue uniform shirt was wrinkled and sweaty from the long day. "Not that mean, hon. Not burning-somebody mean. At least, I never had that impression of him."

"So he must've had a black car or a black truck, huh?"

Dad nodded. "Sara tell you?"

"Yes. The other day. She said you found black paint on the garage behind the hospice. Shay must've run into it when he was leaving."

Dad shrugged. "He must've borrowed the car or the truck. His own car's an old beater, a green Chevy." He shrugged. "Guess it doesn't matter now."

"Mitch has a black truck."

Dad paused with his forkful of macaroni casserole halfway to his mouth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Are you trying to tell me something, Alison?"

"Just something that Mitch said. Lied about, I mean."

Dad put the macaroni in his mouth then speared a leaf of spinach. "Boy, you must really dislike him, a lot more than I ever realized before. Accusing him of—"

"I didn't accuse him, Dad. I just said that he had a black truck and that he lied about something."

But of course she'd accused him of something. She'd meant to accuse him of something.

"You want to know what he lied about?" she said.

"I'd like to remind you of something, young lady." Whenever she got young-ladied, she knew she was in trouble.

"I know what you're going to say."

"If Mitch's parents—"

"—if Mitch's parents hadn't raised me, I would've been put in an orphanage."

She saw pain in his brown eyes and realized she'd hurt him. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"I'd never mock you, young lady. I don't expect you to mock *me.*"

She got up from the table and went over and hugged him. At first, he was stiff, not hugging her back, but then he drew his arms around her tight and they stayed that way for a brief tender time.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"I'm sorry, too, Alison. You know how I get about Mitch's folks."

"I know."

"Mitch isn't as bad as you think. He runs his mouth and he gets drunk and he abuses his authority every once in a while, but he isn't really a *bad* guy, I wouldn't say."

"He sure was against those AIDS patients coming to town."

"So were a lot of people, hon."

"And he was a good friend of Shay's."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"*And* he has a black truck."

"I was hoping we were going to change the subject."

She went back to her place at the table and sat down. Dad was irritated again, she could tell. But she was irritated, too. Didn't she have a right to bring up a subject at the dinner table?

He sipped his coffee, she sipped her iced tea.

Finally, he said, reaching across the table and taking her hand, "I'm going to say something to you, Alison, because I want you to try and understand what adults go through sometimes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. He was sad now and he even looked a little scared. Instead of looking young, he looked very old.

"Just supposing I had the same suspicion you did."

"About Mitch?"

"Right. About Mitch."

"All right."

He glanced away from her as he spoke the next line. "Even if I did, I couldn't do anything about it."

"Oh, Dad," she said. "Dad, you'd have to."

And she realized then that he indeed had the same suspicion she did about Mitch.

"Grandma's sick, honey."

"I know she is."

"If she ever found out that Mitch got in any kind of serious trouble . . ."

His voice drifted off.

He took his hand from hers. Picked up his coffee cup. Held it midway to his mouth but just left it there.

He shook his head.

There were tears in his eyes.

"I don't want you to hate me or think I'm a bad man, Alison. But I owe them so much—"

She stood up, angry, hurt, confused. "I think I'll go lie down."

He looked up at her, shame and sorrow in his gaze. "They raised me, Alison. I can't turn against them now. Besides, I really don't think Mitch had anything to do with it. I really don't."

But she could see that he did.

Dad usually came upstairs to say goodbye when he was going back to the police station for the night. But tonight he just stood at the bottom of the staircase and said, "I'll be back in a couple of hours, Alison." Then: "I'm sorry about our argument."

At first, still angry, she wasn't going to say anything more than goodnight, but then she remembered what her mother had always said. Never leave the house angry with the people you love; never go to bed angry, either. She teared up at her mother's memory. Her mother had had little flaws—she was no angel, but then nobody was—but Alison had never known anybody generally more wise or kind.

"I'm sorry about our argument, too, Dad." Then, the words coming hard, but coming: "I love you, Dad."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I love you, too, Alison. See you about nine-thirty or so."

She had a good hour with her homework. She was doing a paper on Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.* She loved that old book, had read it first in ninth grade and had reread it every year since. The theme of her paper was how small towns were still the same as they'd been at the turn of the century, when Anderson was writing about them. There were good people such as her mom and dad and Mr. Prescott. And there were bad people such as . . . Mitch.

As soon as she started thinking about him, her attention drifted from the book to the hospice. It wasn't that she was such a big liberal where gay people were concerned. She didn't really understand why anybody would want to go to bed with a person of the same sex. And a lot of gays turned her off, especially the ones who pranced around in drag whenever the news showed Gay Pride marches. But her mother had taught her that everybody is a child of God and should be treated as such.

But not Mitch.

She lay back and stared at the ceiling and tried to keep Mitch and the hospice from her mind. All so tidy, the way Shay had left a suicide note, a *typed* suicide note, Dad had said, taking the blame for everything.

Mitch could easily have typed the note and killed Shay himself . . .

Mitch had a black pickup truck. He didn't drive it much because he'd put this huge Chrysler engine in it and it had never run right since. But paint from a black car or truck had been found on the garage behind the hospice . . .

She tried getting back to her book but she had no luck. She just couldn't let go of the thing with Mitch. No matter how long she lived, every time she looked at Mitch she'd see a killer. Every time she looked at Mitch, she'd see her father's shame: that he knew Mitch was in on the hospice fire but hadn't done anything about it.

But what if Mitch *didn't* do it?

That was something else her mother had always said. To be careful of accusing people of things. Because you could build up this case in your mind that made them seem absolutely guilty . . . and then they turned out not to be guilty at all. Her mother was always gently reminding her church friends of this. Dad always joked that a lot of the "respectable" ladies at church would be the first to join a lynch mob.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And Mitch *could* be innocent.

Maybe she disliked him so much she just naturally saw him as guilty of burning down the hospice.

Then she thought of his black truck again.

What if she were to drive over to Mitch's place and look in his garage. That's where he usually kept the black truck. He did a lot of his mechanical work in that garage, too.

What if she were to look in his garage and find that the black truck . . . didn't have any dents or scratches on it.

Then she could be free again of her suspicions . . . and Dad could be free, too; he wouldn't have to feel that he was letting Mitch get away with anything. . . .

She couldn't think of any other way to resolve this, and ever since Mitch had told his stupid transparent lie about not having seen Shay much in the last two years . . . ever since then she'd felt absolutely positive that Mitch had played some role in burning down the hospice.

She tugged on sweater, jeans, Reeboks, and jacket and went down to the driveway, where she slid behind the wheel of the rattly old Honda station wagon her mother had driven for so many years. . . .

Mitch's small frame house was dark. At one time the place had been an acreage—couple acres of corn and soybeans, couple head of cattle, couple dozen chickens maybe—but this was the age of corporate farming, and acreages, along with a lot of family farms, were disappearing.

The closest neighbor was probably a full city block away. This was how the hospice—on the opposite edge of town—had been situated, too. No close neighbors. That's why there'd been no witnesses to the blaze.

She pulled into the driveway and cut her lights. For some reason, now that she was actually out here, she was scared. Mitch would sure raise hell if he caught her snooping around.

She'd move fast.

She took the flashlight from the glove compartment, closed up the station wagon, and then walked down the slanting rutted drive to the ancient two-stall garage.

The full moon and smoky autumn air made her sentimental about Halloween. She wanted to be a little kid again in a witch's costume, trotting down the street hand-in-hand with her mother, her booty bag filled with taffy apples (Mrs. Ryder) and chocolate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cupcakes with marshmallow frosting (Mrs. Spence) and Hershey bars (Mrs. Wyman) and chewy popcorn balls (Mrs. Lanson). Sometimes she didn't want to grow up at all because growing up meant that you had to confront death and people like Mitch and people with AIDS and the hatred that seemed to be in so many, many hearts.

The garage had a barnlike loft and smelled of motor oil and mildew. Ancient brittle saddles and bridles were lined across the east corner. Long, long ago, horses had been raised out here. There was the faint tang of road apples on the dusty air.

Heavy-ply tire tracks showed on the dirt floor. The truck had been here, but was gone.

If the truck wasn't here . . .

The fishing cabin. Mitch spent a good part of the spring, summer, and fall there. A shacklike garage also let him work on his truck and car there.

As she walked back to her car, she wondered if she wanted to make the six-mile drive. She was tired and still needed to study. But then she realized that the subject of Mitch would keep bothering her until she resolved it one way or the other. Besides, tomorrow was Saturday. She could sleep in. And spend the day studying.

She drove out past the sand pits, out past the Indian burial mounds, and into the autumn-blessed forest, the leaves bright even in her bouncing headlights.

With her window rolled down, she could smell the river, part fish and part heat, the temperature still in the high sixties. The moon laid a long golden finger across the slow black water.

The cabin, one of those log cabin jobs you could buy ready-made, sat on a high bank overlooking a narrow strip of sandy beach. She would always remember this beach because it was where Doug Turner, her one true love since first grade, had kissed her on a long-ago ninth-grade evening, when his own one true love, Natalie Winston, was out of town. By now, Doug had forgotten the kiss utterly but Alison held it, and would hold it forever, as not simply memorable but sacred.

No lights shone in the cabin.

Alison pulled over by the garage, killed the ignition, and got out.

She wished she had time for a walk along the shore. There were owls in the trees, and owl song on moon-glow nights was some of the most beautiful music Alison had ever heard.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then she saw Mitch's Pontiac Firebird, dark and ominous somehow, parked on the far side of the garage.

Mitch was around here somewhere.

Now, she really had to hurry.

She took her flashlight and worked her way into the garage where the black truck sat.

There wasn't much room between truck and garage and so she had to squinch and twist and turn, all the time shining her light along the black line of the truck.

She had no trouble finding it, the badly dented front fender, the smashed headlight, the streaks of white paint just to the side of, and above, the grille.

Black truck. Dented fender. White paint.

"Who the hell's there?"

She couldn't remember being this scared since her mother had calmly explained, over dinner that long sad night, how her tests had come back and it was heart disease and how the doctor had high hopes and how everything was going to be fine, something that Alison chose to believe until late that night she went out on the screened-in back porch and saw Dad there alone, his cigarette glowing between his fingers, a cold can of Bud in the other hand. He was weeping, that was the only word that was right to describe the sounds he made, weeping, and she knew then that things weren't as hopeful as her mother had tried to make them sound. Not hopeful at all, Alison suspected that night. Not hopeful at all.

She trembled that way now, got chills, felt her bowels slither together.

"Who the hell's there?" Mitch said again.

She could see him silhouetted in the moonlight, a big man with a big gun, his .357 Magnum no doubt, pointed right at her.

"It's me, Mitch," she said, finally able to talk, "Alison."

"Alison?" he said. "You get your ass out here and right now."

When she was free of the garage, he grabbed her shoulder and shook her hard. "What the hell were you doing in there?"

Then he saw the flashlight in her hand. "What the hell were you looking for?"

She wanted to lie—pleaded with God to grant her a clever lie—but none came. What lie could she possibly tell?

He figured it out then, and she could see it spreading all across his face, his sudden insight, the eyes shrewder now, the nostrils flaring slightly, the mouth set in a scowl.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You were looking at my truck, weren't you?"

He seized her shoulder again, and this time his fingers felt as if they would grind her bones to white dust.

He was just about to say something else when a female voice said, "Hey, Mitch, where are you?"

A woman in a skimpy halter and jeans came walking out of the woods. Alison recognized her as one of the salespeople at a lingerie shop in the strip mall.

Mitch was distracted just long enough for Alison to escape, to run to her car, to jump inside, to fire up the engine, and to shoot away before Mitch could quite reach her.

She saw him in the rearview mirror, shaking his fist at her and shouting something. The car was making so much noise that she couldn't hear his words. But she could see his shaking fist. It was filled with the .357 Magnum.

She was in bed when her father got home. She didn't want to talk about what had happened three hours earlier, Mitch and the white paint on the banged-up front of the black truck.

He came to the foot of the stairs and said, quietly, "Alison? You awake?" When he didn't see her door open with the light on, he usually assumed she'd gone to sleep.

She listened to her father downstairs. She'd pretend to be asleep when he came up. She didn't know what she'd say to him. She pictured his face, the gratitude and sorrow he felt for Mitch's parents. She didn't know what she was going to do.

In the kitchen, he opened and shut the refrigerator. Got himself a beer, she imagined. In the living room, he turned on the TV, probably with the remote control. He was a channel surfer to the highest power. The news was on. He kept it low.

He was downstairs for half an hour. He used the bathroom twice. He changed channels innumerable times. He came upstairs. In the bathroom he used his electric toothbrush and went to the toilet.

All the time she lay awake, listening. She couldn't calm down and she badly needed to calm down.

Before going to bed, he peeked in on her, the way he always did, ever since she was a baby.

She could feel him watching her, studying her almost, and see the smile he often got on his face at such times. He was a sentimental man, her father was, and she loved him for it.

She must have done something that made him think she was waking up because he whispered, "Hon? You awake?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Had to face him sometime. Might as well be now.

She pretended to be very drowsy. "Oh, hi, Dad. When'd you get home?"

He came over and sat on the edge of the bed. He smelled of mint toothpaste and cold, clean water splashed on his face.

"I'm sure sorry about our fight tonight."

"So am I," she said.

"Mitch isn't as bad as you think, honey. He really isn't."

She wanted to say it, about the dented fender and the white paint and all, but she couldn't because she knew what his face would look like if she did.

She manufactured a yawn.

He smiled. "I must be pretty interesting company."

She smiled, too. "Oh, Dad." And then sat up and hugged him. He hugged her back.

"I sure do love you," he said.

"I sure do love you," she said.

"Night," he said.

"Night."

Sometime around one she got to sleep, not because she was tired but simply because she was bored. She'd been in bed, awake, a long time.

She wasn't sure what time she heard the pounding on the downstairs front door.

She sat up, startled, vaguely frightened.

She heard her father hurrying down the steps. Heard the door open.

Heard a loud, drunken, and unmistakable voice: Mitch.

About all she could hear exactly was the swearing. The F word especially. Dad kept telling Mitch to keep his voice down. Muttered, mumbled words: She couldn't hear their precise meaning but the tone conveyed their intent. Rage and fear.

Then she heard glass shatter and the voices got loud and she realized that they were fighting.

She hurried out of her room, her pajamas enough, not bothering with her robe.

Rushed down the stairs and into the living room where she saw her father holding Mitch up against the wall and just about to hit him. A fluted glass flowerpot had been knocked to the floor, broken.

Mitch saw her before Dad did.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Dad saw Mitch's face, he turned to look at her. He had blood all over his mouth. Mitch must've hit him.

He let go of Mitch right away.

"How come you're up, honey?"

"How come I'm up?" she said. "Are you kidding?"

Dad shook his head, looking miserable. "Mitch and I had a little disagreement, was all."

Mitch moved away from the wall where Dad had been holding him. "Tell him where you were tonight, Alison." He was drunk, but angry drunk, focused drunk.

She looked from Mitch to Dad. She sighed. "I shouldn't have been there, Dad."

"Then it's true?"

She nodded.

"God, honey, I asked you not to—"

He paused, tilted his head down, rubbed the back of his neck as if the muscles were very tight.

He looked at Mitch. "You go on home."

"I want to get this settled."

"You heard what I said, Mitch."

"She shouldn't have been out there. She was lucky that I didn't—"

Dad got angry. "She's my daughter, Mitch. Don't forget that. Be very careful of what you say."

For the first time since she'd come downstairs, Mitch backed down. "All right. But I expect *you* to handle it, then."

"I'll handle it. You just go on home."

Mitch was mad again. He jabbed a finger in her direction. "You just keep her away from my property."

He went over and picked up his Cubs cap. It must have fallen off when he'd been fighting Dad.

He put the cap on his head and looked at her again. "You made a big mistake tonight, Alison. A real big one."

After Mitch closed the door, Alison started toward her father, wanting to daub away the blood on his mouth with a piece of Kleenex she had in the shirt of her pajamas.

But he pulled away and went out into the kitchen.

He didn't go to the refrigerator for beer. He went to the cupboard for whiskey.

He put the bottle and a glass on the kitchen table and sat down and poured himself three inches of pure bourbon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alison came over and sat down across from him. She didn't know what to say.

"You had to find out, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"You couldn't just leave it alone, could you? They didn't kill that man on purpose. They didn't know he was in there. Shay felt so guilty he blew his brains out."

"Dad, I—"

She touched his hand but he jerked it away as if shocked by a current of electricity.

"Go up to bed."

"Dad, can't we please talk about—"

"Go up to bed, Alison. I can't talk right now. I can't form a straight thought. And right now, I don't much want to see you, anyway."

"Oh, Dad," she said. He'd never said anything like that to her before.

"You put me in one hell of a position tonight, Alison," he said. "One hell of a position."

She started crying but it didn't matter.

He just sat there, cold and angry and not her father at all but some kind of alien imposter who simply looked like her father.

She went up to bed and fell into a fitful sleep.

She got up a little before nine. Dad was gone somewhere. Usually he left a note. There was no note. She made the peanut brittle for Grandma.

She just kept thinking, God, I wish I didn't know about Mitch. God, I wish I hadn't gone out there. Dad doesn't know what to do and it's my fault.

She scrambled some eggs and made some toast and put on a pot of coffee. She started seeing things from Dad's point of view. She just wished she could have come to this before going out to Mitch's fishing cabin.

Shay burned the hospice down and then killed himself. So, as far as the law was concerned, the case was closed, the guilty party sentenced by his own hand. Why destroy Mitch's folks by arresting Mitch? For sure, Dad would now keep an even tighter rein on Mitch. Maybe in time, Mitch would even grow up a little, become a good man and a good lawman. That happened sometimes, with even the most unlikely people.

So was what Dad was doing all that bad? There wasn't much

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

justice in the real world anyway. Smart lawyers got guilty defendants off all the time; and last year in Idaho a man had been executed for a murder he didn't commit. Unfortunately, the Idaho authorities only found this out six weeks after the execution.

She felt exuberant. She wanted to tell Dad all this. She wanted Dad to know that she wouldn't ever say anything to anybody about Mitch. All she could think of was what he'd said last night, how he didn't much want to see her. Even thinking about it made her tear up. She felt alone and scared. Mom was gone; she couldn't afford to lose Dad, too.

Around eleven, she put on her nicest white blouse and nicest jeans and drove over to the police station. Dad wasn't there. Bob, the weekend daytime dispatcher, said she might try The Roundup, the restaurant where Dad usually ate lunch. Bob also said to tell Dad that Mitch was looking for him, too. Mitch had called twice this morning, in fact.

Dad wasn't at The Roundup. He wasn't at the bowling alley, either, or over at Downtown News, where he sometimes liked to look through magazines.

As she was leaving the magazine store, she saw Grandad walking toward her with a True Value sack in his hand. Grandad liked to build things in his basement shop. He'd made the bookcases in her bedroom. Grandma always said that if you couldn't find Grandad, just look for him in the hardware store.

"Morning, honey."

"Hi, Grandad."

"Guess where I've been?" He smiled and held up his True Value sack. "My home away from home."

"You haven't seen Dad by any chance, have you?"

"No, hon, I haven't. Not this morning."

"If you see him, tell him I'm looking for him, all right?"

"I sure will. I've got a few more stops to make. Maybe I'll see him somewhere."

"Say, is Grandma home?"

He nodded. "She sure is."

"I've got her peanut brittle in the car. I guess I'll run it by there."

"I can take it to her if you want me to."

"No, I haven't seen her for a while, anyway. This'll give me a chance to say hello."

"Well, I'd better be going, hon. If I see that dad of yours, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He kissed her on the cheek and then went on down the sidewalk.

When she was little, the home of her grandparents had always seemed big and mysterious. Now she saw it for what it was, a small white frame house, kept clean and neat with an almost obstinate pride. Grandma was out in the backyard, raking leaves. Despite the chemotherapy she was receiving, she usually managed to keep up with her yardwork.

"Well, here's a nice surprise," Grandma said, setting her rake against an old oak tree and stripping off her cotton work gloves. The cancer had left her thirty pounds lighter and twenty years older. But the smile was still there in the clear blue eyes, the smile and the generosity.

After hugging her, Grandma took the dinner plate heaped with peanut brittle and wrapped in clear plastic.

"Why, this is just what Dr. Daley told me to eat lots of—peanut brittle."

Grandma had a great sense of humor. But looking at her now, in her condition, Alison felt numbing sorrow. This was the world of adults . . . the world Alison's eighteenth birthday would bring her one year closer to.

"I'll go set this down on the back steps," Grandma said.

The backyard was just as tidy as the front. Grandma had raked the leaves into small piles. Grandad would later bag them up. They'd always divided this particular job this way. There were white sheets on the clotheslines. They smelled fresh and clean. A scarecrow watched Alison from his place in the vegetable garden.

"You just missed your father," Grandma said when she came back, wiping her hands on her faded jeans.

"Really? Did he say where he was going?"

"No. Afraid he didn't, hon." She looked at Alison with those smiling but very intelligent and intuitive blue eyes. "He was like that, too."

"Like what?"

"Same way you are, hon. Like something was the matter."

"Oh."

Grandma watched her closely. "Something happened, didn't it?"

"No, no, Grandma, everything's fine. Honest."

Grandma just watched her some more. "We've never lied to each other before, hon. I sure would hate to start now. Your father wouldn't tell me what was wrong—but I sure hope you will."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Oh, Grandma, Alison thought. You don't want to know. You really don't.

Grandma took her hand. "I'd appreciate the truth, Alison. That father of yours has got me worried. I've never seen him the way he was this morning. There was something he wanted to tell me—but he just couldn't. I felt sorry for him."

"Grandma, you're not feeling well and—"

Grandma nodded to the house. "I've got some fresh coffee brewing, hon. Let's go have a cup. Then you can tell me what happened between your father and Mitch."

They went inside. Grandma poured them both some coffee. "He didn't want to hurt you, Grandma, Dad didn't. That's why he wouldn't tell you."

"No, but you will, won't you? Please, hon. I really want to know the truth."

So Alison told her the truth.

She had to find Dad. Had to. Their argument last night had left her feeling more alone than she ever had in her life. She wouldn't tell him that she'd told Grandma the truth. All she wanted to do was make up with Dad. Mitch didn't matter. Not anymore.

There was only one place left she could think of, and that was where she found him, out at her mother's grave.

The cemetery was on a hill. Mom was buried near the bottom, several yards from a large mausoleum. There was a bench in front of the mausoleum that faced Mom's grave. Dad was on the bench.

He saw her coming. He watched her for a long time. She had no hint of what he was thinking. She thought of him being an alien again, an utter stranger. Panic filled her. She couldn't afford to lose Dad, too.

She went over and knelt by Mom's grave and said a prayer and asked Mom to help Dad to forgive her. She also told Mom that she wished her eighteenth birthday wasn't coming up. The world of adults absolutely terrified her. Then she went over and sat on the bench, careful to keep at least two feet between them.

Off in the distance, somebody was mowing the lawn with a power mower. Closer up, jays and wrens and cardinals played in the fiery trees. Everything smelled pleasantly smoky.

She said, "I'm never going to tell anybody about Mitch, Dad. I want you to know that."

But he didn't respond to what she said. He said: "I know you can never respect me again, Alison."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He sounded as sad as she felt.

She took his hand. He gave hers a tender squeeze. He said: "I always wanted to be somebody you could admire, Alison. I'm sorry."

"God, Dad. I *love* you, don't you understand that? I don't care about Mitch or anything. I just want to be happy again. And I want *you* to be happy again. Can't you see that? Can't you see that, Dad?"

He slid his arm around her shoulder and brought her to him and said: "I talked to your mother for a long time this morning, Alison. She told me everything's going to be all right."

"It *is* going to be all right, Dad. It really is."

He gave her a squeeze. "I'll make it up to you, Alison. I promise."

"There's nothing to make up, Dad. I just want you to love me." Then she giggled the way she used to when she sat on his knee and he played patty-cake with her. "I just want you to love me *and* buy me a pizza."

He laughed. "And you know what else we should do, after the pizza, I mean?"

"What?"

"Go to the movies. We haven't done that for a long time. I'll bet there's a good one at the mall."

"That'd be great. It really would be."

And so it was—pizza (sausage and green pepper), movie (Harrison Ford), and then home where, exhausted both physically and emotionally, Alison went to bed at ten o'clock.

The next day, she walked downtown to the library. Kids played touch football on October-brown lawns, dogs chased Frisbees, infants looked up from strollers and smiled sweetly. The day was so gorgeous you couldn't help but be happy.

She was half a block from the library when she saw a police squad car coming down the street. She usually waved to the patrolmen. Dad always picked good ones.

But as her arm came up in the air, she saw the familiar face of Mitch behind the wheel, and her arm came down.

He was scowling at her.

She averted her face, put her head down, and started walking quickly toward the library.

Mitch whipped the patrol car over to the curb and flung open the passenger door. "Get in here," he said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She froze. She wanted to run to the library but she knew she wouldn't.

She went over and got in the car.

Mitch whipped away from the curb like a teenager, the tires squealing.

He drove out into the country and he drove fast, then he picked up the blacktop that ran east.

He didn't say anything and neither did she.

She was scared. All sorts of awful images played in her mind. Maybe he was going to take her into the country and kill her. That was the image that came to her most often.

"I'm taking care of it," Mitch said after a while. "So even if you wanted to tell somebody what happened, it wouldn't matter—because you couldn't prove it."

"What do you mean, taking care of it?"

"Never mind what I mean. I just wanted to make sure you hadn't said anything to anybody."

Softly she said, "How could I, Mitch? I couldn't go against Dad that way."

"You just remember that. Tell him I'll stop by around supper-time and give him some news."

She wondered what he was talking about. First he'd hinted that he was taking care of the evidence. And now he was going to stop by the house. But why?

He looked bigger than he ever had, angrier, crazier. His knuckles on the wheel were white. She sensed that he was strong enough to snap the wheel in half if he wanted to.

"All I care about is Dad," she said.

"Perfect little Alison," he said.

She felt her face burn with anger. "He's an honest man, Mitch, and now he has to be dishonest and it's really hurting him. He's never going to be the same."

"So what am I supposed to do about it?"

She thought for a moment. "You could go to Judge Michaels and tell him what happened. Tell him you didn't know anybody was inside there when you burned it down."

He glared at her. "Yeah, you'd like to see me in prison, wouldn't you? That'd suit perfect little Alison just fine, wouldn't it? Well, screw you, perfect little Alison! I'm not going to see Judge Michaels and you're not going to tell anybody. You understand?"

When she looked up, she was surprised to see that they were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

once again a half-block away from the library, exactly where he'd picked her up.

Now she understood why he'd taken her for the ride. He wanted to make sure that she hadn't told anybody before he had a chance to hide the evidence. The truck, that was it, Alison decided. He was going to do something with the truck, the only thing that could tie him to the burning.

He pulled up to the curb. "Get out."

She opened the door and looked over at Mitch. "Dad's never going to be the same. You're making him go against everything he and my mother believed in."

"You heard what I said. Get out."

She got out.

For dinner, she fixed fresh trout and green beans and American fries.

She waited until they were eating before she told Dad about Mitch taking her for the ride.

Dad was angry. "Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Threaten you?"

She shook her head. "Not really. He was just scared I was going to tell somebody, I guess. But after he fixes the evidence—"

The bell rang.

"Mitch," she said.

"I'll get it," Dad said, his face still hard with anger. He threw down his napkin, stood up, and stalked to the front door. His hands were half formed into fists.

She heard the door open up and then Dad saying, "You ever threaten my daughter again, you bastard, I'll take your face off. You understand me?"

"I don't want to stand out here on the porch and talk," Mitch said.

"Do you understand me?" Dad said, still enraged.

"All right, all right," Mitch said. "I shouldn't have taken her for the ride or said some of the things I did. Just cool down, Bill. Cool down."

They came to the table and sat down. Mitch wore a blue windbreaker and a yellow polo shirt and tan slacks. You could see the shape of his shoulder harness beneath his jacket.

"Do I get a cup of coffee?" Mitch said.

"No," Dad said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But Alison got up and got Mitch one anyway.

Mitch nodded thanks. When Alison was seated again, Mitch said, "It's going to be all right."

"What is?"

"You know, about the truck and all."

"Oh?"

"I—I told Dad."

"You told Dad about the hospice?"

Mitch nodded. "Yeah. I didn't have any choice. I wanted him to fix the fender. You know, at that shop of his they do real good body work. He'll do it tonight. When they're closed. Nobody'll ever know."

Alison looked over at Dad.

"I'm surprised he went along with it," Dad said. That's just what Alison had been thinking.

"I'm his son," Mitch said. "He doesn't have a hell of a lot of choice, does he?"

Mitch was quieter than Alison had ever seen him. She almost felt sorry for him. Almost, but not quite, not when she thought about how he'd now made two honest men lie for him, Dad and Grandad both.

Then he sighed and said, "It's over."

"It is, huh?" Dad said.

"Yeah, Bill, it is."

This was the familiar Mitch, the one Alison had known all her life. The sneer was back on his lips and in his eyes. He didn't have respect for anybody he saw as square.

"You get on with your life, I get on with mine," Mitch said. He wiped his face, sighed again. "It's been a long couple of weeks, let me tell you."

"So just like that we forget about a man dying, huh?"

"I didn't know he was in there, Bill. I really didn't."

"But you don't feel any guilt," Dad said. "Otherwise you'd own up to it."

"He had AIDS, he was going to die anyway. Why should I go to prison for somebody like that?"

Oh yes, Alison thought. This was the old familiar Mitch.

That's when the knock came, a soft, hesitant knock. They all glanced at each other and then Alison got up and went to the door.

Grandad was there. "Can I come in?"

"Sure."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She led him to the dining room table. He sat in the empty chair next to Alison, facing Dad and Mitch.

Mitch said, "Shouldn't you be working on my truck, Dad?"

Grandad didn't say anything for a long time, just stared at Mitch. Then: "We talked about it, Mitch, your mother and I, about what you did. She doesn't want me to help you, Mitch. She doesn't think it's right."

"You told Mom?" Fear was in his voice now.

Alison said, softly, "I told her, Mitch."

Mitch jumped up from the table, hurled his coffee cup into the wall. "You told her? You're the one who's sending me to prison? You little bitch!"

Alison had never seen him this angry or frenzied. He was terrifying to watch.

But before anybody had time to react to him, Mitch reached into his jacket and pulled out his .357 Magnum and aimed it right at Alison.

"Little Miss Perfect! You little conniving bitch!"

In a long, silent, ugly moment, Alison saw Mitch's finger curve around the trigger, and start to pull back on it and—

"Mitch!" Grandad screamed.

For a single moment, Mitch was distracted.

Alison did the only thing she could think of, grabbed her own coffee cup and threw it at Mitch's hand.

The gun exploded.

But just as it did, the coffee cup collided with the barrel.

The shot went wild, into the wall two feet above Alison's head.

By now, Dad had had time to grab the gun from Mitch, and slam him back into the other wall.

"What were you going to do, Mitch? Kill Alison?" Dad said. "Kill a young girl?"

Monday after school, a fine warm day with hawks flying down the warm airstreams and jack-o'-lanterns making their first appearance on leaf-covered porches, Alison went up to the graveyard.

She knelt and said a prayer and then went over and sat on the bench.

"Thursday's my birthday, Mom, and I sure wish you were going to be here." She didn't want to cry but she couldn't help it. "I sure miss you, Mom. And I sure don't know what to do. About turning eighteen, I mean. Because I'm really scared about it. I really am. I want to be a little kid again, Mom, and have you here with me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and have Grandma be all right and just have a nice, normal life and—"

She was about to say more but she heard the crunch of leaves as feet stepped on them.

Dad was here, smiling at her.

"I thought you might be up here."

She nodded.

He came over and sat down and took her hand. "Your birthday still bothering you?"

"I'm just worried about becoming an adult, is all."

"Mom would know what to say, wouldn't she?"

"Yes," Alison said, "yes, she would."

And then she slid her arm around his strong Midwestern shoulders and just hugged him and listened to the wrens and the jays and the owls, and to the more distant sound of a fast train up in the hills where the horses ran.

"Maybe it won't be as bad as I think," Alison said when they sat and looked at Mom's grave again, "being an adult."

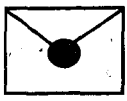
"That's what I've been wanting to tell you," Dad said. "Alison, you've been an adult for a long time, and you're doing just fine." He took her hand and held it tenderly. "You're doing just fine."

After a while, they said another prayer at graveside, and then walked down the hill together.

Dinner that night was spaghetti, the one thing that Dad knew how to cook. Or thought he did, anyway. About halfway through, when it came time to make the sauce, Alison had to give him a wee bit of help, but she didn't mind. She didn't mind at all. ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ELLERY QUEEN
P.O. BOX 5127, HARLAN, IA 51593-5127
OR CALL 1-800-333-3053

For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving.
Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STALKING HORSE

by Susan B. Kelly

The third-place winner in MWA's Fiftieth Anniversary Short Story Contest in 1994, Susan B. Kelly returns to *EQMM* this month with a rough-edged tale of professional killers in contemporary London. Ms. Kelly's latest novel, *Death is Sweet,* was published in March of this year by Constable in the U.K. American readers should look for *Kid's Stuff,* published by Scribners in 1994.

I've never understood why it has to be the roughest pubs in London. Surely you can set up a hit in comfort. I suppose the clients expect it—graffitied benches, sawdust on the floor, ashtrays that were last emptied for the royal wedding—not the sort of place they will be seen by anyone they know. Just the sort of place you can get someone killed for the price of three weeks in the Seychelles in the high season.

Accidents, I tell them, are my speciality, along with burglaries/muggings-gone-horribly-wrong. They don't seem to mind that I'm a woman, after the initial surprise. Well and good: Women are less visible, less likely to arouse suspicion. We are also the less sentimental sex. If you want a job done right, get a woman to do it.

Amateurs, all of them. One chap even offered to pay me by cheque. It will come, mind you. One day—soon—they will brandish garish plastic and ask, "American Express?"

"Cash," I told him, "used notes; don't take it all out of your savings account at once. If the police suspect you, they can and will examine your bank accounts and five grand in cash is not easy to explain away. Yes, they will suspect you. You have motive. You must have. You wouldn't be here otherwise. Sell something that

©1996 by Susan B. Kelly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

won't be missed; swap the Rolex for a fake. Half up front, half on delivery."

They have to justify themselves, these amateurs. One man told me at length that he had nothing against his wife, was even quite fond of her, his childhood sweetheart. But she was middle-aged now and thickening round the waist, greying round the hair. She had not kept up as he climbed the greasy pole, talking too much and too loudly at cocktail parties about her garden and the price of carpets. His Gucci mistress was getting restless, turning thirty and looking for a ring on her finger. They expect more sympathy from me than from a man—women are harder on their own sex.

"Divorce? Are you serious? The business is half hers—on paper, anyway, and that's what will matter in court. Do you know what divorce would cost me?"

Five grand to arrange a little accident: so much more economical and you get to keep the kids. Death: so much quicker, cleaner, more final. Besides, she's sagging, wrinkled; she won't find anyone else. She'll be sad and lonely. It's kinder this way. She's being killed with kindness.

I tell them, "Meet me by the canal (in the tearoom at Fortnum's, in front of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum) two days from now. Bring the money, the name and address of the hit, details of the car she drives, and a recent photo. Keep busy: not with something that shrieks 'alibi' at the police but not just, 'I was at home watching TV on my own all evening, Inspector,' either."

They usually turn up. That's when I show them my warrant card and arrest them for conspiracy to murder.

Some of them think that since the murder has never happened, they haven't done anything wrong. They are soon disabused. Expensive lawyers squeal entrapment, but in vain. The putative victim—usually the wife—stands in court with ice in her veins and watches him go down for a long stretch. I often think, perhaps fancifully, that something in her has indeed died.

Do you read the papers? We crop up surprisingly often in trials in cozy suburbs like Isleworth and Enfield. The prosecution alleges that Mr. Norris approached an undercover police officer and offered to pay him five thousand pounds to dispose of his wife, Dorothy. They tend to be called Dorothy or Daphne or Phyllis—something slightly prewar like that. Mr. Norris denies all charges.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Deny away, Mr. Norris. I have you on tape—your nice, educated, middle-class voice. The case continues. Pictures, page nine.

Pictures of Mr. Norris, that is, and the wounded, outraged Mrs. Norris, carefully made-up and wearing a hat. One picture you never see is of the undercover police officer, who doesn't use his real name in the pub and will be back there next week waiting for a new fish to bite.

I check in with my inspector by phone. I always have backup waiting round the corner when I make the arrest, in case he turns nasty; otherwise, it's a lonely job. Most policemen aren't loners—they're aggressive, gregarious, sporty types—but there's a place for everyone in the Metropolitan Police: handling dogs, backing horses into demonstrators, patrolling the river by boat; or smiling at a vicarious murderer across the unpolished brass of a saloon bar table.

They come by word of mouth. I don't exactly advertise in the local paper. What would I put? Rubbish cleared? Pubs are the arteries of any English town, where you go to make instant friends or enemies, to pick up a lover for one night, to buy drugs, or a gun, or a hit.

She was very nervous. They always were, but this one's eyes were everywhere. I was to call her Rachel and she was to call me Sally. We were talking about a man we agreed to call John. At first, of course, I assumed he was her husband, but then a very different tale began to unfold and I listened with increasing interest, seeing her beginning to trust me as if I was just a girlfriend she had run into and was pouring out her troubles to.

There was instant empathy. I found, disconcertingly, that I liked her and I had never liked a punter before, never warmed to those greedy weasel eyes where pound signs clock up like in a cartoon, putting a paltry price on the head of someone they once looked at with love, sometimes haggling over the fee.

Rachel was a single mother, she explained, a divorcée with two children aged eight and six, both girls. The father had long since dropped out of sight and the Child Support Agency didn't bother looking for him since Rachel was not on welfare but supported her little family with her job in a bank.

I judged her to be about my own age, which is thirty-two. She was smart in her work clothes, belted into a raincoat on that wet October evening, looking out of place in the seedy bar. She was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thin, too thin, her neck rising gauntly out of the bank clerk's white shirt and the navy scarf which matched her stiff skirt. Her damp brown hair fell loose over her tired eyes, and her lipstick had bled into the worry lines about her mouth.

I know desperation when I see it.

Fifteen months earlier she had met John, a customer at the bank, when she had discussed different types of mortgage with him. He had returned twice more for clarification and she had been amused and a little flattered to realise that he understood perfectly the distinction between endowment and repayment and just wanted an excuse to talk to her again.

By the time he had plucked up courage to ask her out for a drink, it had seemed churlish to refuse. Besides, he was attractive enough, if a little young for his declared age of twenty-eight, personable if a little shy, and she was often lonely.

A drink had led on to dinner a few days later, a walk in the country that weekend. He got on well with the children, bribing them with too-expensive presents. He seemed perfect, too good to be true. Something was wrong. She didn't fancy him and suspected that his own desires were not the simple orthodoxy she might have anticipated, a sharing of warmth and intimacy. The first time he tried to kiss her, his lips were cold and repellent and her thighs instinctively clamped together. Meanwhile, his hand trembled on her breasts as if he found the rise of flesh distasteful. One or two of his remarks made her unaccountably nervous. Regretfully, she ended the relationship before it went any further.

Or tried to.

For more than a year now she had been cruelly and unusually punished for her attempted flight from loneliness. John had rented a flat opposite her own little house and spied on her continuously. He rang her at three in the morning to give her a detailed account of who had been in and out of her home that day, what she and the children had been wearing, what they had eaten for supper. Now she kept her curtains drawn day and night—the house a prison of shadows and fear.

The cat—the girls' much-loved Sparkle—went out one day and was never seen again. Two casual men friends had been scared off by slashed tyres and scratched paintwork. Obscene letters were delivered at home and at work.

"He—" She hesitated and sucked at her lower lip, willing back tears. "He put an announcement in the *Gazette,* in the Births

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and Marriages, you know, saying that I had died suddenly at home that weekend—*Rachel, much-missed mother of Tess and Emma.* . . . You can imagine."

The police? I said, imagining.

So hard to prove. No one actually saw him slashing and gouging; cats *did* stray; there was no law against his taking a flat across the road, standing at his front window for hours without end. The announcement had been placed at a busy time and paid for in cash, and the girl at the newspaper couldn't identify him.

It wasn't that the local police weren't sympathetic, they were; they were just powerless. When he did something concrete—when he attacked her, raped her, burnt her and her children alive in their beds one night—then they could act. Until then, it was her word against his and he had rights too.

She had considered disappearing, but good jobs were hard to come by now and the girls were settled in their school. What if she went through all that upheaval and he simply found her again? People were gullible and he was plausible in his neat suit and tidy haircut, with his polite if colourless voice. It took only one innocent colleague, one other mum at the school gate, to say, "Rachel? Oh yes, she's gone to Peterborough."

She must be, I suggested, at the end of her tether. She mimed dissent, gulping at her glass of bad white wine.

"I would have put up with it, hoping he would get tired of it, fixate on someone else, but he rang me a week ago today, half-past four in the morning. I shall never forget his voice as long as I live, the banal matter-of-factness of it."

He hadn't identified himself, knew that she knew who it was.

" 'Rachel, darling. I know what it is—what's keeping us apart. It's the children, isn't it? But for them you would be free to love me and we could go away together and nothing would ever come between us. It's no problem, darling. I'll get rid of them for you. Permanently. They'll never come between us again.' "

My glass broke in my hand where I was squeezing it. There was blood on my fingers, thinned and paled with wine.

Rachel had screamed and slammed the phone down. The next morning she had taken the children to her sister's in Beckenham, the three of them climbing over the fence in the back garden and running for the tube, their heads down, like criminals.

A stranger, this man, a total *stranger,* demanding satisfaction, exerting power, ruining a carefully balanced life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Five thousand?" she said. "That's what they told me." I nodded. "It's all the money I have in the world—rainy-day money—but it'll be worth it."

I explained about not taking it all out of the bank at once. She said she would get a cheap loan from her employer, say she wanted to buy a new car.

"Meet me at the foot of Nelson's Column on Tuesday," I instructed. "Bring half the cash and all the details I need to target him. Then go away for a few days, somewhere where people can see you and remember you."

We left separately.

I rang the inspector that night.

"Brian? It's me, Sally."

I couldn't bring myself to call him sir, not since he used to grope me and squeeze my tits when we did car surveillance together in CID, ignoring my wriggling protests with "You know you want it, really."

"What joy this week, love?"

"Not a nibble. Sudden outbreak of law-abidingness in Hounslow."

"Time to change your patch, would you say?"

"Yeah," I said. "How about the Savoy this time—better class of psychopath?"

He laughed. "Find somewhere down Acton way. Put out the usual feelers. Talk to you soon."

I grunted assent and hung up.

For the sake of two little girls and the sanity of a nice ordinary woman—a woman who might have been me if things had worked out differently—I had an accident to arrange for a man called John, a burglary gone tragically wrong. I fingered the wrought and torn tape from my dictaphone on the desk before me, then watched its brief, evil-smelling flare in the fire. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE SISTER HOODS

by David Michael Walsh

She'll die by morning, all three did say
Obligations so pressing, no money to pay
How faithfully she kept up her insurance
And assayed our loyalty beyond endurance
Not to say that we didn't truly love her
She was, sweet dear, our sainted Mother
Clearly blood is blood and water's water
And God shall smite a murderous daughter
Thus lots were drawn, so very democratic
Long straws nodded, short straw panicked
It fell to Peggy, once truest and purest
To snuff old Mater, and quickly, Dearest
Her choice of method, as one looks back,
A certain, say, intelligence it did lack
Not poison nor bullet, no rope or knife,
Thick Peg tried PROPANE to end Ma's life
It was open the valve and close the vent
Now light the match and your sins repent
First Mum, then Meg, so quickly vanished
Gone straight to Satan, forever banished
And not one penny shall I or Sis collect
Not likely, with a noose around the neck
Take heed of our moral, so plain to see:
Be patient, child, Mom *was* ninety-three!

© 1996 by David Michael Walsh

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MONSTER

by Bill Pronzini

He was after the children.

Meg knew it, all at once, as soon as he was inside the house. She couldn't have said exactly how she knew. He was pleasant enough on the surface, smiling, friendly. Big and shaggy-haired in his uniform, hairy all over like a bear. But behind his smile and underneath his fur there was menace, evil. She felt it, intuited it—a mother's instinct for danger. He was after Kate and Bobby. One of those monsters who preyed on little children, hurt them, did unspeakable things to them—

"Downstairs or upstairs?" he said.

"... What?"

"The stopped-up drain. Downstairs here or upstairs?"

Although he is a versatile short story writer and novelist, Bill Pronzini is probably best-known for his "Nameless" detective stories, several of which have recently been published in this magazine. Now a collection of some of the best of the Nameless adventures, *Spadework*, is available from Crippen & Landru Publishers, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23005-9315. The book contains an introduction by Marcia Muller and an afterword by the author. †

A feeling of desperation was growing in her, spreading toward panic. She didn't know what to do. "I think you'd better leave." The words were out before she realized what she was saying.

"Huh? I just got here, Mrs. Thompson. Your husband said you got a stopped-up drain—that's right, isn't it?"

Why did I let him in? she thought. Just because he said Philip sent him, that doesn't make it so. And even if Philip did send him ... Oh God, why *him,* of all the plumbers in this city?

"No," she said. "No, it ... it's all right now. It's working again, there's nothing wrong with it."

©1996 by Bill Pronzini

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He wasn't smiling anymore. "You kidding me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Yeah, why? Over at the door you said you been expecting me, come on in and fix the drain."

"I didn't—"

"You did, lady. Look, I haven't got time to play games. And it's gonna cost you sixty-five bucks whether I do any work or not so you might as well let me take a look."

"It's all right now, I tell you."

"Okay, maybe it is. But if it was stopped-up once today, it could happen again. You never know with the pipes in these old houses. So where is it, up or down?"

"Please . . ."

"Upstairs, right? Yeah, now I think of it, your husband said it was in the upstairs bathroom."

No! The word was like a scream in her mind. The upstairs bathroom was between their room, hers and Philip's, and the nursery. Baby Kate in her crib, not even a year old, and Bobby, just two, napping in his bed . . . so innocent and helpless . . . and this man, this beast—

He moved past her to the stairs, hefting his tool kit in one huge, scab-knuckled hand. "You want to show me where it is?"

"No!" She cried it aloud this time.

"Hey," he said, "you don't have to bust my eardrums." He shook his head the way Philip did sometimes when he was vexed with her. "Well, I can find it myself. Can't hide a bathroom from an old hand like me."

He started up the stairs.

She stood paralyzed, staring in horror as he climbed. She tried to shriek at him to stop, go away, don't hurt the babies, but her voice had frozen in her throat. If any harm came to Kate and Bobby, she could never forgive herself—she would shrivel up and die. So many childless years, all the doctors who'd told her and Philip that she could never conceive, and then the sudden miracle of her first pregnancy and Bobby's birth, the second miracle that was Kate. . . . If she let either of them be hurt she would be as much of a monster as the one climbing the stairs—

Stop him!

The paralysis left her as abruptly as it had come on; her legs pumped, carried her headlong into the kitchen. A knife, the big

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

butcher knife . . . She grabbed it out of the rack, raced back to the stairs.

He was already on the second floor. She couldn't see him, but she could hear his heavy menacing tread in the hallway, going down the hallway.

Toward the nursery.

Toward Kate and Bobby.

She rushed upward, clutching the knife, her terror so immense now it felt as though her head would burst. She ran into the hallway, saw him again—and her heart skipped a beat, the fear ripped inside her like an animal trying to claw its way out of a cage.

He was standing in the nursery doorway, looking in at the children.

She lunged at him with the knife upraised. He turned just before she reached him, and his mouth shaped startled words. But the only sound he made was an explosive grunt when she plunged the knife into his chest.

His mouth flew open; his eyes bulged so wide she thought for an instant they would pop out like seeds from a squeezed orange. One scarred hand plucked at the knife handle. The other groped in her direction, as if to catch and crush her. She leapt back against the far wall, stood huddled against it as he staggered away, still grunting and plucking at the knife handle.

She saw him fall once, lurch upright again, finally reach the top of the stairs; then the grunting ended in a long heaving sigh and he sagged and toppled forward. The sounds he made rolling and bouncing down the stairs were as loud and terrible as the thunder that had terrified her as a child, that still frightened her sometimes on storm-heavy nights.

The noises stopped at last and there was silence.

Meg pushed away from the wall, hurried into the nursery. Bobby, incredibly, was still asleep; he had the face of a golden-haired angel, lying pooched on his side with his tiny arms outstretched. Kate was awake and fussing. Meg picked her up, held her tight, soothed and rocked and murmured to her until the fussing stopped and her tears dried. When the baby was tucked up asleep in her crib, Meg steeled herself and then made her way slowly out to the stairs and down.

The evil one lay crumpled and smeared with red at the bottom. His eyes still bulged, wide open and staring. Dead.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And that was good, it was *good,* because it meant that the children were safe again.

She stepped over him, shuddering, and went to the phone in the kitchen. She called the police first, then Philip at his office to ask him to please come home right away.

A detective sergeant and two uniformed officers arrived first. Meg explained to the detective what had happened, and he seemed very sympathetic. But he was still asking questions when Philip came.

Philip put his strong arms around her, held her; she leaned close to him as always, because he was the only person since her daddy died who had ever made her feel safe. He didn't ask her any questions. He made her sit down in the living room, went with the detective to look at what lay under the sheet at the foot of the stairs.

". . . don't understand it," Philip was saying. "He was highly recommended to me by a friend. Reliable, honest, trustworthy—the best plumber in town."

"Then you did send him over to fix a stopped-up drain."

"Yes. I told my wife I was going to. I just don't understand. Did he try to attack her? Is that why she stabbed him?"

"Not her, no. She said he was after your children. Upstairs in the nursery where they're asleep."

"Oh my God," Philip said.

He must have sensed her standing there because he turned to look at her. I had to do it, Philip, she told him with her eyes. He was a monster and I had to protect the children. Our wonderful son Bobby, sweet baby Kate . . . I'm their mother, I couldn't let them be hurt, could I?

But he didn't believe her. She saw the disbelief in his face before he turned away again, and then she heard him lie to the detective. He lied, he lied, Philip lied—

"We don't have any children," he said. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Ron Chironna

THE UNINVITED GUEST

by Edward D. Hoch

The spring of 1779 was an unusually quiet time for the American colonies in the midst of their war of revolution. Perhaps it was a result of the imperceptible merging of the seasons that year. Neither side in the struggle found it necessary to break camp and move out with the coming of spring because in truth there had been hardly a snow or frost since mid January.

General Washington and his wife Martha were with the troops at their winter quarters in Morristown, New Jersey, when Alexander Swift arrived there on April first in the company of Molly McVey. The camp itself consisted of sturdy huts and cabins, a far cry from the conditions at Valley Forge two winters earlier. And spring had indeed come early to the region, with buds already visible on the fruit trees.

"All is quiet," Washington said, greeting Swift with a firm handshake. The general was a tall man with big hands and feet. At age

©1996 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forty-seven his hair was still reddish-brown, and his large gray-blue eyes looked out from a pale face slightly marked by smallpox. "It is as if the war had gone away."

"The support of the French has been a great help," Alexander Swift replied. Indeed, since France had signed a treaty of aid with the revolting colonies and sent its fleet briefly into American waters the British had evacuated Philadelphia the previous year, leaving it to General Benedict Arnold to enter the city with a corps of Massachusetts troops. Arnold, wounded at Saratoga and unable to walk without support, had been made military commander of the capital. It was a post suitable for a wounded hero who was also an old friend of General Washington.

A Revolutinary War spy/ detective series would hardly be complete without an adventure concerning the war's most notorious traitor, General Benedict Arnold. The setting of this piece is prior to Arnold's defection in 1780, however, and weaves a traditional whodunit into a background web of wartime espionage. ✝

"And this would be Miss McVey?" Washington asked, extending his hand to the slender, dark-haired young woman at Swift's side.

"Excuse my rudeness. General Washington, may I present Miss Molly McVey, who was of great help to me at Camp West Point."

"A pleasure," the general said. "I have heard much about you, Miss McVey. Will you be living in this area?"

She blushed nicely. "I am traveling with Mr. Swift at the present time. I may be returning north soon."

"So might I," Washington responded, walking back to take a seat behind his desk. "In a month's time I plan to move north along the Hudson. I may set up headquarters at New Windsor, beyond West Point on the eastern bank."

"A wise move," Alexander Swift said. "It will bring you closer to the enemy activity."

"Meanwhile, I have a particular assignment of a social nature for you—for both of you, as a matter of fact."

"A social nature?" Swift could not imagine what the general had in mind. Until now his special assignments as a civilian had involved informal action against the British, sometimes as a spy.

"Two old friends, General Benedict Arnold and Miss Peggy Ship-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pen, are to be married in one week's time. I cannot attend personally, but I would like you to represent me and take a gift from Martha and me."

"So Arnold is marrying again!" Swift knew the wounded hero only slightly, but was interested in the news. Benedict Arnold was a widower with three half-grown sons. "He must be nearly forty."

"Thirty-eight, I believe," Washington said. "Peggy is much younger, of course, not quite nineteen. She is the daughter of Judge Edward Shippen, a prominent Quaker and something of a Loyalist, I do believe. I've known her since she was a child."

"They remained in Philadelphia during the British occupation?"

The general nodded. "And I daresay Peggy waltzed with British officers. Young women her age can be terrible flirts. I visited the city this past winter and saw them all, including Arnold. These are difficult times for him. He harbors some bitterness at others being promoted ahead of him. When our rebel troops reentered the city, Arnold placed Philadelphia under martial law. Shopkeepers resented that. As you know, Arnold has since resigned his post. But a faithless friend of mine, Joseph Reed, now president of the state's Supreme Executive Council, has actually brought charges of malfeasance against him, and Congress is considering the matter." He lowered his voice slightly. "I must admit, Alexander, that when I visited Philadelphia this past winter I found the general living in a grand style of which I could not approve."

"How is his leg?"

"Not good. He needs help standing upright, and four men must assist him in and out of his coach. Still, he claims to be improving. Certainly young Peggy sees some improvement, but then love is blind."

"Where will next week's wedding be held?"

"At the Shippen home in Philadelphia. It will be a quiet ceremony, and I am sorry I cannot be there. Will you go? You can both attend as my representatives."

Alexander Swift glanced at Molly. He could see that the suggestion intrigued her. The social world of a Philadelphia wedding was a long way from the tavern at West Point where she was employed. "Certainly," he told General Washington. "We would consider it a great honor."

Washington had sent a message ahead to inform the family that Swift and a guest would be attending in his place. Arrangements were made for Alexander and Molly to arrive the evening preced-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing the wedding and spend two nights with Major Cutler, an aide to Benedict Arnold.

Cutler proved to be a slender, taciturn man in his early thirties, about Swift's age, who also would be attending the following day's ceremony. His wife Louisa was more talkative. She was a plain but lively woman a few years younger than her husband. Molly liked her at once, and the two fell into a lengthy conversation following dinner.

Swift and Major Cutler stepped outside for a cigar, but the major still said very little. "How is Arnold's leg mending?"

"Better."

"Does he still need support for standing and walking?"

Cutler drew on his cigar. "Sometimes he tries hopping about. He'll probably use his cane at the wedding."

"Do you think the British are gone from this city for good?"

"I think so."

"It was a great victory for our side."

The slender officer shrugged. "They pulled out, we came in."

Later, when they were beneath the covers of the great feather bed in Cutler's guest room, Molly spoke quietly to Alexander Swift. "Louisa Cutler told me some interesting things about Benedict Arnold while you and the major were enjoying your cigars."

"I'm sure it was more interesting than our conversation."

"She said Peggy Shippen's brother was arrested as a Tory sympathizer, and most of their rich friends are not really loyal to America. Peggy herself was courted by Major John Andre, a British officer, and wore a lock of his hair in a locket on her necklace. More than that, Louisa hinted at Arnold's extravagant living and illegal business partnerships."

Swift wasn't surprised at the latter. "Washington mentioned something about charges of malfeasance being brought against him." He considered the situation as he drifted into sleep. Washington was an old friend of General Arnold. Perhaps he'd had more than one reason for sending a representative to the wedding in his place, especially a representative like Swift who'd handled special assignments in the past.

Washington's gift to the bride and groom was a silver sugar bowl and creamer fashioned by Paul Revere. It seemed a fitting wedding present, linking these patriots who had fought the British from the beginning. If Arnold was marrying into a family of Tory sympathizers, Swift felt sure he could hold his own against them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They left their horses at the Cutler house the following morning and the two couples traveled by carriage to the Shippen family home, the box containing Washington's gift on the floor at their feet. It was Thursday, the eighth of April, four days after Easter, and the Philadelphia streets were bright with springtime. In the front yard of the Shippen home the apple trees were blossoming weeks ahead of schedule.

It was to be a quiet ceremony, with only the family and a few friends and neighbors in attendance. The minister was a solemn Church of England gentleman who stood apart with Mr. Shippen. Swift introduced himself and Molly, expressing General Washington's regrets and presenting the gift he had sent. Judge Shippen, in turn, introduced Peggy's mother, brother, and two older sisters, as well as Arnold's boys. The guests milled around the large parlor speaking with family members, and Swift counted about two dozen people in all. He walked over to where a broad-shouldered General Arnold sat in full dress uniform, awaiting the appearance of his bride.

"I'm Alexander Swift. You probably don't remember me, sir."

Arnold's stern hawkish features turned toward him, the blue eyes seeming out of place in such a swarthy face. When he stood with the help of a thick walking stick he was shorter than Swift remembered. "You're General Washington's man."

"That's correct. He is sorry he could not be here in person. Both he and Martha send their regrets and promise they will visit you both at their earliest opportunity."

A man in formal clothes had begun to play a harpsichord, and all conversation ceased. Suddenly the bride appeared on her father's arm. Peggy Shippen, twenty years younger than Arnold, had the blossoming freshness of a young girl in springtime, a slim blue-eyed beauty who seemed totally in control of the moment. Her hair was piled high on her head in an elaborate European style and she wore a flowing white wedding gown. As the minister stood by, Judge Shippen delivered her to Benedict Arnold. For a moment Swift was reminded of his own marriage, which ended with the coming of the revolution when he left New York while his wife Amanda stayed on with a British officer.

Arnold stood with some difficulty at Peggy's side, supported by his cane, while the minister read the vows, concluding with, "I now pronounce you man and wife." The happy couple kissed while the small audience applauded.

Some bottles of French champagne were produced and servants

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

filled glasses for the guests to toast the new husband and wife. Following the toast, Swift noticed for the first time a tall, angular man whose clothes seemed a bit loose. He sipped the champagne as he moved about the parlor, stopping first at one group and then another. No one seemed to acknowledge his presence until he finally reached the Cutlers and Molly. Major Cutler and his wife said a few words to him and he set his champagne glass on a table momentarily to take something from his pocket to show them. Swift turned as General Arnold approached with his bride. Across the room he spotted Molly conversing with a woman guest.

"Mr. Swift, I have the pleasure of introducing my bride, Peggy."

Seeing her close up, Swift was struck again by her youthful beauty. "I wish you both every happiness," he said. "General Washington was quite disappointed that he was unable to attend."

"Tell him we missed him," Peggy Arnold said, her voice soft and melodious.

When they'd finished making their rounds of the guests, Arnold signaled for quiet. He thanked everyone for coming and then announced that as a wedding gift to his bride he had purchased Mount Pleasant, a large Philadelphia estate on the banks of the Schuylkill River. It had a hundred acres of gardens and orchards, and Peggy seemed to glow with pleasure at the news.

"How can he afford such a place?" Swift wondered, speaking to the Cutlers a few minutes later.

As usual Major Cutler said little, but Louisa lowered her voice and told them, "I hear that he is deeply in debt with loans from moneylenders. He has borrowed on his house in New Haven and pledged the back salary and commissions he hopes to obtain from the Congress."

Swift was troubled by the news. He knew Washington would not be pleased.

Others were proposing toasts now, and the lanky man in the ill-fitting suit stepped forward to raise his glass. "To the Sons of Liberty!" he announced, speaking the name of a patriotic society, originally secret but now disbanded. "To Sam Adams and Paul Revere!"

He took a long drink from his glass as someone else started to propose a toast. Then, barely a moment later, he uttered a sharp cry and doubled over, clutching his stomach. Swift stared at him, frozen to the spot like everyone else. The man seemed to fold in half, then topple slowly to the floor.

A doctor emerged from among the guests, a neighbor of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shippens named Caleb Wade. He was a big man with long white hair, though his face was not especially old. He quickly knelt by the body, feeling for a pulse.

"This man is very sick," he announced after a moment's examination. "Can we get him to a bed?" Several of the men came forward to help carry the stricken man upstairs. By now he seemed almost unconscious, struggling to breathe.

"Who is he?" Swift asked Major Cutler. "I saw you speaking with him earlier."

For a moment Cutler looked blank. "Did you?"

"Of course, dear," his wife reminded him. "He was the odd man who came up to us and started talking. Remember? We were wondering if he was a friend of the bride or the groom."

"What was he talking about?"

"Just the wedding," Louisa Cutler replied. "He took out a little drawing of an animal to show us. I thought it very odd."

"It was a deer," Molly McVey verified. "A female deer. I said it was nice and he gave it to me."

General Arnold came up to them then, much distressed. "Do any of you know that man? I've spoken to the judge and his wife and he wasn't on their guest list. They assumed he was a friend of mine."

"We spoke to him," Cutler replied, "but we don't know who he is."

"I had better see to him," Swift decided. "Is it all right if I go upstairs?"

"Of course," Arnold said. "Dr. Wade is still with him."

He found the doctor in the bedroom of one of Peggy's sisters, at the top of the stairs. He was bending over his patient but he straightened up as Swift entered. "Can he speak, Doctor?"

"I'm afraid he's passed away, just a moment ago."

Alexander Swift stared down at the body, suddenly smaller in its ill-fitting garments. "Did he say anything before he died?"

"Just one word. It sounded like *dough*, or perhaps *do*, as in music."

Swift remembered the drawing the man had shown to Molly and the Cutlers. "Could it have been *doe*, a female deer?"

"I suppose so."

"We'd better go tell Judge Shippen and General Arnold that he's dead."

The death of the uninvited guest cast a pall over the wedding party. While arrangements were made for the removal of the body, Alexander Swift again separated Benedict Arnold from his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bride. "I think we should talk about what happened, General. Washington will want a full report when I return."

They were in the judge's library at the rear of the house, looking out on a sloping yard with more apple trees in bloom. "I never saw the man before," Arnold insisted. "I have found no one who invited him." As he spoke his hand went to his injured leg, massaging it as if to drive away the pain.

"Could he have been someone to whom you owed money?"

"Certainly not!" The question seemed to offend him. He stood up, leaning heavily on his walking stick. "If you will excuse me, I must rejoin my bride. We have nothing more to discuss."

Swift helped him out the door but did not follow immediately. The body was being removed under the supervision of Dr. Wade. The rest of the wedding party had gone outside while the grisly task was performed. Swift caught the doctor's eye and motioned him into the library.

"Would you care to speculate as to the cause of death, Doctor? Could it have been a heart attack?"

"Certainly not that. The stomach cramps, together with his death within such a short time, suggest a poison of some sort."

"Do you mean the man took his own life?"

"Either that or someone took it for him."

The festivities had been dampened by the death of the unknown man, but once the body was removed the family seemed determined to make the best of it. Before long there were more toasts to the bride and groom, and with a final round of goodbyes the happy couple went off in a carriage for a bit of privacy. "He's a real American," Judge Shippen remarked. "My daughter is lucky to have him for a husband. That's a beautiful estate he's bought for her."

Later, as the party was breaking up, Swift asked Major Cutler about his brief conversation with the dead man. "He showed you a drawing of a female deer, and Dr. Wade thinks his final word might have been *doe*. Would that have any meaning to you?"

"None at all."

Swift and Molly walked to the carriage with the Cutlers and the major instructed the driver to take them home. On the way the conversation was mainly about the wedding, with only a passing reference to the dead stranger. It wasn't until they were alone in their bedroom at the Cutler house that Swift reminded Molly of the drawing she'd said the unknown man gave her.

"I have it here, but it is hardly a work of art."

He took the small sheet of stiff paper which she'd rolled into a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tube and slid up the sleeve of her dress. It was not an original pencil sketch, he saw at once, but a printed copy. The deer seemed to be prancing through some underbrush. On the back a name was written, very small: *John Slate.* It was followed by the words *Penn House Inn.*

"Do you think that's the artist or our uninvited guest?" Molly wondered.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But it gives me something to work on."

"To work on? General Washington sent us to attend a wedding, nothing more!"

"He told me Judge Shippen has Loyalist sympathies. If that's the case, a killing at his home—on the very day of his daughter's wedding to an American general—could be important."

Molly thought it over. "Most likely he was simply an old beau of Peggy's and she didn't want to admit it."

"Wouldn't her father know him if that was the case? Certainly he'd be a familiar figure at the balls she attended." He looked again at the back of the picture. "Where is Penn House Inn?"

"It's here in the city, down near the waterfront. Did you see me speak to that girl at the wedding? We worked together briefly in Albany. She told me she's a waitress at Penn House."

"Strange that she was invited to such a small wedding." He tapped a finger thoughtfully on the drawing. "Of course there's another possibility."

"What's that?"

"She might have come with the man who was killed. Did you notice her after his collapse?"

"No," she admitted, "but I wasn't really looking for her."

"What's her name?"

"She calls herself Persia Tolliver."

"Suppose we pay a visit to Penn House Inn."

Alexander and Molly excused themselves, telling the Cutlers they wanted to see a bit of the city before they headed home the following day. Molly had changed into a riding costume and they set out in early afternoon, heading their horses toward the Delaware River. "I never expected to be in Philadelphia," she confessed. "A few days away from the tavern at West Point seemed a good enough idea. I should have known nothing is ever simple with you, Alex."

"If this man Slate, or whatever his name was, is a murder victim, Washington will want the details. Philadelphia is full of Loy-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

alists, and they seem to be getting closer to Benedict Arnold all the time."

"I don't like your getting involved in these things. You could have been shot as a spy when the British captured you in New York last year."

"Washington needed me there," he said simply. It was something they'd talked little about.

"You saw your wife in New York."

"*And* her British lover," he emphasized. "There is no love lost between us."

Molly rode silently for a time, until at last they came to a large three-story building that displayed the sign *Penn House Inn.* They dismounted and went inside.

"You have rooms for the night?" Swift asked the innkeeper, a bearded man with sly eyes.

"That we have! Our rates are posted on the wall."

"I'm looking for John Slate. Is he staying with you?"

"Slate? We may have had someone by that name, but he is no longer with us."

"What did he look like? Lanky, with ill-fitting clothes?"

"Perhaps."

Molly could see his mounting frustration and she asked a question of her own. "Is Persia Tolliver working today?"

The sly eyes shifted. "You know Persia?"

"An old friend. I saw her this morning at a wedding and she told me she was working here."

He nodded. "I expect her soon. She's due in at two o'clock."

They waited at a table in the bar and presently the young woman Swift had glimpsed at the wedding came through the door from the kitchen. She had changed out of the dress she'd worn to the wedding and she carried a bar rag, ready for work. Molly stood up and addressed her. "Hello, Persia. My friend wanted to meet you. This is Alexander Swift."

She shook her head, a look of fear shooting across her face. "I don't know anything about what happened."

Swift tried to keep his voice low and nonthreatening. "Were you invited to the wedding, Persia?"

"I know the family. Peggy's brother comes in here sometimes." Up close she was older than he'd thought, easily into her thirties. Her pale blond hair was already showing some gray.

"So you decided to attend the wedding and take John Slate with you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Who?" she asked.

"Don't play games. The tall thin man who had to borrow a wedding garment that was a poor fit. The man who was poisoned, Persia."

"Yes," she agreed. "It was a bit loose, wasn't it? He got it from the cook here, just before we left for the wedding. But what's this about poison?"

"You know he's dead, don't you?"

Her eyes widened a bit. "I slipped out after he fell down. I thought he was drunk and they'd find out we weren't invited. I didn't know he'd been poisoned."

"Who was he?" Molly asked.

Persia Tolliver sighed and made a sour face. "You had it right. His name was John Slate, or at least he told me it was. He'd been here at the inn for three or four days. He told me a lady friend had information that would make him rich. When I mentioned knowing Peggy Shippen's brother he insisted we must attend the wedding."

"Her brother didn't recognize you?"

She blushed a bit. "I didn't really know him. I only waited on him once. His father approached us before the ceremony and I said we were friends of General Arnold."

"He showed us a drawing of a female deer," Molly said. She took it from her pocket. "What does it mean?"

"I have no idea."

"His name was written on the back, along with the name of this inn," Swift told her. "It was meant as a message, an address where he could be reached."

"I know nothing about it," she insisted.

"This city was under martial law," he reminded her, "and the army retains a great deal of power here. You could be imprisoned as a spy."

She snorted. "For what? For spying on a wedding?"

"Are John Slate's belongings still here at Penn House?"

"I suppose so. They'd be up in his room."

"The innkeeper said he'd left."

"Morris? He probably heard of Slate's death and hopes to keep his possessions for himself."

"Could you get a key to his room?"

Persia frowned at the question. "Are you trying to get me in trouble?"

"John Slate was murdered. We're trying to keep you out of trouble."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She thought about that, wiping the table with her rag. "I've got a key," she said finally. "I'll take you up there."

She disappeared into the kitchen and returned after a moment, nodding for them to follow her. They went up the stairs quickly while the innkeeper was busy with his ledgers. She stopped at the third door on the left and inserted a long slender key into the lock. The room was somewhat drab, with a big brass bed as its major feature. Persia went immediately to a closet and opened the door. A jacket, pants, and shirt hung there.

"These are uniform pants," Swift said at once, examining them closely. "Was he in the Continental Army?"

"I know next to nothing about John Slate. He appeared at Penn House on Easter Sunday morning and took a room for several nights. I had some drinks with him after my work was done, and came up here a few times because he was lonely. I guess he was in the army for a while."

"What did he talk about?" Molly asked.

"Not about himself. Nothing about himself. He asked about Benedict Arnold and his officers. When he found out I knew Peggy's brother he insisted we go to the wedding, even though we weren't invited. I was crazy to agree to it, but he said he had to see somebody to get his money."

While they continued talking, Swift went quickly through the few clothes in the closet. He found nothing, nor was there anything of interest in the leather saddlebags on the closet floor, other than a paper confirming that John Slate had indeed served in Washington's Continental Army as a private. He was about to abandon his search when he noticed a small sheet of paper on a writing desk near the window. It was a duplicate of the printed drawing of the deer Slate had produced at the wedding.

There was a small cast-iron stove in the room for heating purposes, and Swift noticed a few scraps of paper waiting to be burnt. He picked them up and saw at once that it was a letter, or the draft of one. The date and salutation were missing, but after piecing the rest together he was able to read it: *This is your second warning. I know your secret. Leave one thousand pounds at Penn House—*

Something after that had been crossed out, and then he'd torn it up and probably started over. There could be no doubt it was the beginning of a blackmail letter, threatening someone with exposure. Probably it had been written that very morning, before the wedding, since the stove would have been lit the previous night to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

take away the chill. Even with the early spring that year, the Philadelphia nights could be cool in early April.

John Slate had written that note in the morning, knowing he was to attend Arnold's wedding with Persia Tolliver. It seemed likely that the blackmail message was meant for someone who would also be attending the wedding. Had he delivered it, and had that caused his death?

Molly paused in her examination of the room to peer over his shoulder at the assembled pieces of torn paper. "It is certainly not a suicide note," she observed.

"No," he readily agreed. "If John Slate was contemplating suicide he would hardly be hatching a blackmail scheme. It seems likely that the person being blackmailed acted quickly to remove the threat."

"That quickly, Alex? Who would carry a vial of poison with them, especially to a wedding?"

It was a logical question and he had no immediate answer for it. Something was stirring in his memory, though. Something—

"Didn't General Arnold own a pharmacy and bookstore in New Haven before the war?"

"I don't know, Alex. I know nothing about his early days."

"A pharmacist, even a former one, might be a source for poisons."

"But he must have sold the store long ago."

Swift shook his head. "I believe he left it in the care of his sister."

"Certainly you can't imagine he might have poisoned a guest at his own wedding."

"Anything is possible."

"But what was the meaning of the drawing? How would Arnold be linked to a female deer?"

He'd forgotten about the picture of the doe. "Tell me exactly what happened when John Slate approached your group with that illustration."

"As I remember it, he said something about the wedding and then took some papers from an inside pocket. He showed us the drawing of the doe and asked if any of us had ever seen it before. Louisa said she had not, and passed it to her husband. When it was my turn I admired it and he said I could have it, that he possessed more copies."

Swift turned to Persia Tolliver, hovering near the door as if waiting a chance to escape. "Thank you for your help here. We'll be on our way."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You won't tell them I was at the wedding, will you? I had nothing to do with his death."

"You will be kept out of it if at all possible," Swift assured her.

John Slate's body had been taken to an undertaker frequently used by the Continental Army in Philadelphia. Swift and Molly rode there from Penn House Inn, arriving around four o'clock. After a brief conversation the undertaker took them into his office and showed them the contents of the dead man's pockets. "Nothing unusual here, as you can see. A money purse with a few sovereigns, a handkerchief, a key."

Alexander Swift picked it up. "That's to his room at the inn. You found no letter or message of any sort?"

"Nothing like that."

He thanked the man and they returned to their horses. "What do you think, Alex?" Molly asked.

"Assuming he wrote a final version of that letter, it seems that he managed to deliver it to someone at the wedding. He and Persia went nowhere else."

"How would Slate even know who would be at the wedding? It was a small, private affair."

"Exactly! Think about it, Molly. Who would he know with certainty would be attending? The bride and groom, and the bride's family. I think we can rule out Arnold's children by his previous marriage. They're hardly old enough to have a secret of interest to a blackmailer. And his sister is still in New England. But there is one other person who would certainly be at the wedding—Major Cutler, Arnold's personal aide."

"Cutler!"

"I'm sure I'm right, Molly, and I want to confront him with it. Can you get his wife out of the house on some pretext this evening?"

"I'll try, but I can't believe that Cutler—"

"That's who Slate spoke with. That's who he showed the drawing to."

"True enough," she agreed.

"All I have to do is trace the poison to him."

"Do you think General Arnold got it for him?"

"There's one other possibility. The Shippens' neighbor, Dr. Wade."

After a light supper Molly suggested a walk by the river, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Louisa Cutler agreed, though it was already growing dark outside. When they were alone, Swift lit one of Major Cutler's cigars and said, "This has been a full day. At least Arnold and his bride will be relaxing now."

"And most enjoyably so," Cutler agreed with a little chuckle. "Peggy is a lovely young woman." He opened a bottle of French brandy and filled their glasses.

Swift put down the cigar after a few puffs and cleared his throat. "I've spent a few hours this afternoon looking into the death of that strange fellow at the wedding."

"Oh? Have you learned anything?"

"Quite a bit. The man's name was indeed John Slate and he had a room at the Penn House Inn. He came to the wedding uninvited, in the company of a waitress at the inn named Persia Tolliver. She exited quickly after his collapse."

"What was his purpose in attending?"

"The man was a blackmailer," Swift told him. "He came to deliver a second blackmail note to someone he knew would be present. Because of his ill-fitting clothes, he attracted my attention from the outset. Though he approached several groups, yours was the first party he spoke to, and the first he showed the drawing of the deer. I believe, Major Cutler, that you were the object of the blackmail, and that you eliminated the threat immediately by poisoning the man's drink when he set it on the table next to you."

"You're very observant." The major smiled slightly. "Where did I obtain this poison, and how did I happen to bring it with me to General Arnold's wedding?"

"You obtained it from the Shippens' neighbor, Dr. Wade, with the excuse that you needed to kill some rats in the house."

"I see you have spoken to him. We do have rats and Wade gave me some poison for them. But I never killed this man Slate or anyone else, except in battle!"

Alexander Swift smiled slightly as there came a knocking on the front door. "I asked Dr. Wade to come over here after supper. That should be him now."

The portly physician was shown in by a servant. He shook hands with Swift and Cutler and took a seat. "Now how can I be of service, gentlemen?"

It was Major Cutler who took up the conversation. "Mr. Swift believes that I poisoned that man today with the dosage you provided for the killing of our house rats."

"Well—" The doctor seemed suddenly embarrassed. "He asked if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I had ever provided you with poison and I remembered that instance last month. I certainly cast no suspicion in your direction, Major."

Swift took from his waistcoat pocket the pieces of the note he'd found in John Slate's room, plus the folded picture of the deer. "This is my proof of a blackmail plot, gentlemen. It was the motive for the crime."

"What motive is this?" Major Cutler demanded. "This picture of a doe means nothing."

But it was Dr. Wade who spoke again. "*Doe* was the dying man's last word. I didn't see this picture until now so I didn't connect the two. This is the symbol of D.O.E., a Loyalist secret society that is the antithesis of the Sons of Liberty."

"D.O.E.?"

The doctor nodded. "The Daughters of England."

And in a flash Swift realized his terrible mistake. He had sent Molly off in the darkness with a murderess.

It was almost dark by the time Molly and Louisa Cutler reached the river, which was swollen with spring rains. Louisa was as talkative as ever, chattering on about life in Philadelphia since the British withdrawal. "It's certainly nice to taste French brandy and champagne again," she enthused. "And that Lafayette! Why, he's little more than a boy!"

"He is three years older than General Arnold's new bride," Molly pointed out.

"Well, she's just a child too! I do hope she doesn't ruin the general with her extravagant ways."

"The man who was poisoned at the wedding—John Slate—apparently came there to blackmail someone. Do you think it could have been Peggy?"

"I doubt it. We never saw her until she entered on the judge's arm, and following the ceremony she was clinging to General Arnold the whole time. When could he have slipped her his note?"

Molly felt an instant chill down her spine and stopped walking. "Louisa," she said carefully, "how did you know about the blackmail note? I never mentioned a note."

"Isn't that what blackmailers usually send? The word itself implies mail."

Everything was falling into place for Molly. "When Slate approached us at the wedding it wasn't to give a message to your husband. You were the one he was after. He handed the drawing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the doe to you first, and the folded note would have been underneath. It was you who dropped the poison into his glass, not your husband."

"Oh, I don't think anyone would believe that," Louisa said. She reached out to grab Molly's arm. "Come on, let me help you. It's treacherous along the river in the dark."

Molly shook her off. "You'd had a prior threat and prepared yourself with a vial of poison. You saw your chance and you took it. What is your secret, Louisa? Does your husband know it?"

Now the woman grabbed both her arms, dragging her toward the water. "My secret is that I am loyal to the mother country, loyal to England. If that is a crime for which I can be blackmailed, so be it! There are plenty of others like me, including Arnold's wife. What you win on the battlefield may be lost in the bedroom."

The earth went out from under Molly's feet and she grabbed at the woman's sleeve, pulling her down too. Then she felt a strong arm grip her waist just as her feet hit the water, pulling her up and free. It was Alex, come from somewhere in the dark like a charging animal.

Louisa Cutler screamed once from the darkened water, and then she was swept away.

"She killed that man," Molly gasped, trying to catch her breath.

"I know," Swift said. "I figured it out just too late."

"It was soon enough for me."

"She belonged to a secret society called the Daughters of England. Slate found out from one of his lady friends and tried to blackmail her. She obtained some poison her husband was using to kill rats, and when Slate appeared at the wedding with a second warning she slipped it into his drink when he set it down to take out the picture."

"That's when he passed her the note. After the first message she was expecting him at any time."

"We'd better get back and tell Cutler what's happened. An accidental drowning, perhaps."

"Alex, right at the end she said Arnold's wife was involved too. Can we believe that?"

He breathed a sigh. "Perhaps General Washington should not be told of this until we are certain. The war is not yet won. There are dangerous days ahead." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GUILT TRIP

by Val McDermid

Because neither of my parents was too bothered about religion, I managed to miss out on Catholic guilt. Then I found myself working with Shelley. A guilt trip on legs, our office manager. If she treats her two teenagers like she treats me, those kids are going to be in therapy for years. "You play, you pay," she said sweetly, pushing the new case file towards me for the third time.

"Just because I *play* computer games, it doesn't mean I'm qualified to deal with the nerds who write them," I protested. It was only a white lie; although my business partner Bill Mortensen deals with most of the work we do involving computers, I'm not exactly a techno-illiterate. I pushed the file back towards Shelley. "It's one for Bill."

"Bill's too busy. You know that," Shelley said. "Anyway, it's not software as such. It's either piracy or industrial sabotage, and that's your forte." The file slid back to me.

"Sealsoft are Bill's clients." Brannigan's last stand.

"All the more reason you should get to know them."

I gave in and picked up the file. Shelley gave a tight little smile and turned back to her computer screen. One of these days, I'm going to get the last word. Just wait till hell freezes over. On my way out the door and down the stairs, I browsed through the file. Sealsoft were a local Manchester games software house. They'd started off back in the dawn of computer gaming in the mid

Britain's Val McDermid took top honors from her country's Crime Writers Association this year, winning the gold dagger for her thriller, *The Mermaids Singing*. The book will be published in the U.S. by HarperCollins in late autumn. Ms. McDermid is already known to American readers through her novels starring Kate Brannigan, the sleuth in this new story. †

©1996 by Val McDermid

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eighties, writing programs for a whole range of hardware. Some of the machines they produced games for had never been intended as anything other than word processors, but Sealsoft had grabbed the challenge and come up with some fun stuff. The first platform game I'd ever played, on a word processor that now looked as antique as a Model T Ford, had been a Sealsoft game.

They'd never grown to rival any of the big players in the field, but somehow Sealsoft had always hung in there, coming up every now and again with seemingly simple games that became classics. In the last year or two, they'd managed to win the odd film tie-in licence, and their latest acquisition was the new Arnold Schwarzenegger/Bruce Willis boys-'n'-toys epic. But now, two weeks before the game was launched, they had a problem. And when people have problems, Mortensen and Brannigan is where they turn if they've got sense and cash enough.

I had a ten-o'clock appointment with Sealsoft's boss. Luckily, I could get there by foot, since parking round by Sealsoft is a game for the terminally reckless. The company had started off on the top floor of a virtually derelict canalside warehouse that had since been gutted and turned into expansive and expensive studio flats where the marginally criminal rubbed shoulders with the marginally legitimate lads from the financial services industries. Sealsoft had moved into modern premises a couple of streets away from the canal, but the towpath was still the quickest way to get from my office in Oxford Road to their concrete pillbox in Castlefield.

Fintan O'Donohoe had milk-white skin and freckles so pale it looked like he'd last seen daylight somewhere in the nineteenth century. He looked about seventeen, which was slightly worrying since I knew he'd been with the company since it started up in 1983. Add that to the red-rimmed eyes and I felt like I'd stumbled into *Interview with the Vampire*. "Call me Fin," he said with no trace of any accent other than pure Mancunian as we settled in his chrome and black-leather office, each of us clutching our designer combinations of mineral water, herbs, and juices.

I resisted the invitation. It wasn't the hardest thing I'd done that day. "I'm told you have a problem," I said.

"That's not the word I'd use." He sighed. "A major disaster waiting to happen is what we've got. We've got a boss money-earner about to hit the streets and our whole operation's under threat."

"From what?" I asked.

"It started about six weeks ago. There were just one or two at first, but we've had getting on for sixty in the last two days. It's a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nightmare," O'Donohoe told me earnestly, leaning forward and fiddling anxiously with a pencil.

"What exactly are we talking about here?" He might not have anything better to do than take a long tour round the houses, but I certainly did. Apart from anything else, there was a cappuccino at the Atlas Cafe with my name on it.

"Copies of our games with the right packaging, the right manuals, the guarantee cards, everything, are being returned to us because people who buy them shove the disks inside into their computers and find they are completely blank. Nothing on them at all. Just bog standard, high-density, preformatted, unbranded $3\frac{1}{2}$" disks." He threw himself back in his chair, pouting like a five year old.

"Sounds like pirates," I said. "Bunch of schneid merchants copying your packaging and stuffing any old shit in there."

He shook his head. "My first thought. But that's not how the pirates work. They bust your copy protection codes, make hundreds of copies of the program and stuff it inside pretty crudely copied packaging. This is the opposite of that. There's no game, but the packaging is perfect. It's ours." He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a box measuring about eight inches by ten and a couple of inches deep.

The cover showed an orc and a human in mortal combat, outlined in embossed silver foil. O'Donohoe opened the box and tipped out a game manual, a storybook, four disks with labels reading 1 through 4, and a guarantee card. "Right down to the hologram seal on the guarantee. Look," he pointed out.

I leaned forward and picked up the card, turning it to check the hologram. He was right. If this was piracy, I'd never seen quality like it. And if they could produce packaging like this, I was damn sure they could have copied the game too. So why the combination of spot-on packaging and blank disks? "Weird," I said.

"You're not kidding."

"Is this happening to any of your competitors?"

"Not that I've heard. And I would have heard, I think."

Sounded as if one of Sealsoft's rivals was paying off an insider to screw O'Donohoe's operation into the deck. "Where are the punters buying them? Market stalls?" I asked.

Head down, O'Donohoe said, "Nope." For the first time, I noted dark shadows under his eyes. "They're mostly coming back to us via the retailers, though some are coming direct."

"Which retailers? Independents or chains?" I was sitting for-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ward in my seat now, intrigued. What had sounded like a boring piece of routine was getting more interesting by the minute. Call me shallow and superficial, but I like a bit of excitement in my day.

"Mostly smallish independents, but increasingly we're getting returns from the big chain stores now. We've been in touch with quite a few of the customers as well, and they're all saying that the games were shrink-wrapped when they bought them."

I sat back, disappointed. The shrink-wrapping was a clincher. "It's an inside job," I said flatly. "Industrial sabotage."

"No way," O'Donohoe said, two pale pink spots suddenly burning on his cheekbones.

"I'm sorry. I know it's the message no employer wants to hear. But it's clearly an inside job."

"It can't be," he insisted bluntly. "Look, I'm not a dummy. I've been in this game awhile. I know the wrinkles. I know how piracy happens. And I guard against it. Our boxes are printed in one place, our booklets in another, our guarantee cards in a third. The disks get copied in-house onto disks that are overprinted with our logo and the name of the game, so you couldn't just slip in a few blanks like these," he said, contemptuously throwing the disks across the desk.

"Where does it all come together?" I asked.

"We're a small company," he answered obliquely. "But that's not the only reason we pack by hand rather than by production line. I know where we're vulnerable to sabotage, and I've covered the bases. The boxes are packed and sealed in shrink-wrap in a room behind the despatch room."

"Then that's where your saboteur is."

His lip curled. "I don't think so. I've only got two workers in there. We've always had a policy of employing friends and family at Sealsoft. The packers are my mum and her sister. My Auntie Geraldine. They'd kill anybody that was trying to sabotage this business, take my word for it. When they're not working, the door's double-locked. They wouldn't even let the parish priest in there, believe me."

"So what exactly do you want me to do?" I asked.

"I don't want you questioning my staff," he said irritably. "Other than that, it's up to you. You're the detective. Find out who's putting the shaft in, then come back and tell me."

When I left Sealsoft ten minutes later, all I had to go on was a list of customers and companies involved in returns of Sealsoft's games and details of who'd sent back what. I was still pretty sure

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the villain was inside the walls rather than outside, but the client wasn't letting me anywhere near his good Catholic mother and Auntie Geraldine. Can't say I blamed him.

I figured there wasn't a lot of point in starting with the chain stores. Even if something hooky was going on, they were the last people I could lean on to find out. With dole queues still nudging the three million mark, the staff there weren't going to tell me anything that might cost them their jobs. I sat in the Atlas over the coffee I'd promised myself and read through the names. At first glance, I didn't recognise any of the names of the computer suppliers. We buy all our equipment and consumables by mail order, and the only shop we've ever used, in dire emergencies, was the one that used to occupy the ground floor of our building before it became a supermarket.

Time for some expert help. I pulled out my mobile and rang my tame darkside hacker, Gizmo. By day, he works for Telecom as a systems manager. By night, he becomes the Scarlet Pimpernel of cyberspace. Or so he tells me. "Giz? Kate."

"Not a secure line," he grumbled. "You should know better."

"Not a problem. This isn't confidential. Do you know anybody who works at any of these outlets?" I started to read out the list, with Gizmo grunting negatively after each. About halfway through the list he stopped me.

"Wait a minute. That last one. Epic PC?"

"You know someone there?"

"I don't, but you do. It's wossname, the geezer that used to have that place under your office."

"Deke? He went bust, didn't he?"

"'S right. Bombed. Went into liquidation, opened up a new place in Prestwich a week later, didn't he? That's his shop. Epic PC. I remember because I thought it was such a crap name. That it?"

"That'll do nicely, Giz." I was speaking to empty air. I like a man who doesn't waste my time. I drained my cup, walked up the steps to Deansgate station, and jumped the next tram to Prestwich.

Epic PC was a small shop on the main drag through Prestwich village. I recognised the special-offer stickers. It looked like Deke Harper didn't have the kind of fresh ideas that would save Epic PC from its predecessor's fate. I pushed open the door and an electric buzzer vibrated in the stuffy air. Deke himself was seated behind a PC in the middle of the long room stuffed with hardware and software, fingers clattering over the keys. He'd trained himself well in the art of looking busy; he let a whole five seconds pass

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

between the buzzer sounding and his eyes leaving the screen in front of him. When he registered who his customer was, his eyebrows climbed in his narrow face. "Hello," he said uncertainly, pushing his chair back and getting to his feet. "Stranger."

"Believe me, Deke, it gets a lot stranger still," I said drily.

"You live out this way, then?" he asked nervously, hitting a key to clear his screen as I drew level with him.

"No," I said. Sometimes it's more fun to let them come to you.

"You were passing?"

"No." I leaned against his desk. His eyes kept flicking between me and his uninformative screen.

"You needed something for the computer? Some disks?"

"Three in a row, Deke. You lose. My turn now. I'm here about these moody computer games you've been selling. Where are they coming from?"

A thin blue vein in his temple seemed to pop up from nowhere. "I don't know what you're on about," he said, too nonchalantly. "What moody computer games?"

I rattled off half a dozen Sealsoft games. "I sell them, sure," he said defensively. "But they're not hooky. Look, I got invoices for them," he added, pushing past me and yanking a drawer open. He pulled out a loose-leaf file and flicked through fast enough to rip a couple of pages before he arrived at a clutch of invoices from Sealsoft.

I took the file from him and walked over to the shelves and counted. "According to this, Deke, you bought six copies of *Sheer Fire II* when it was released last month?"

"That's right. And there's only five there now, right? I sold one."

"Wrong. You sold at least three. That's how many of your customers have returned blank copies of *Sheer Fire II* to Sealsoft. Care to explain the discrepancy? Or do I have to call your friendly local Trading Standards Officer?" I asked sweetly. "You can go down for this kind of thing these days, can't you?" I added conversationally.

Half an hour later, I was sitting outside Epic PC, behind the wheel of Deke's six-year-old Mercedes, waiting for a lad he knew only as Jazbo to turn up in response to a call on his mobile. Amazing what people will do with a little incentive. I spotted Jazbo right away from Deke's description. A shade under six feet, jeans, trainers, and a Chicago Cubs bomber jacket. And Tony Blair complains about Manchester United's merchandising.

He got out of a battered boy-racer's hatchback clutching a carrier bag with clear, box-shaped outlines pressing against it. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

banged off a couple of snaps with the camera in my backpack. Jazbo was in and out of Epic PC inside five minutes. We headed back into town down Bury New Road, me sitting snugly on his tail with only one car between us. We skirted the city centre and headed east. Jazbo eventually parked up in one of the few remaining terraced streets in Gorton and let himself into one of the houses there. I took a note of the address and drove Deke's Merc back to Prestwich before he started getting too twitchy about the idea of me with his wheels.

Next morning, I was back outside Jazbo's house just before seven. Early risers, villains, in my experience. According to the electoral roll, Gladys and Albert Conway lived there. I suspected the information on the list was well out of date. With names like that, they might have been Jazbo's grandparents, but a more likely scenario was that he'd taken over the house after the Conways had died or suffered the fate worse than death of an old people's home. The man himself emerged about five past the hour. There was less traffic around, but I managed to stay in contact with him into the city centre, where he parked in a loading bay behind Deansgate and let himself into the back of a shop.

I took a chance and left my wheels on a single yellow line while I walked round the front of the row of shops and counted back to where Jazbo had let himself in. JJ's Butty Bar. Another piece of the jigsaw clicked into place.

Through the window, I caught the occasional glimpse of Jazbo, white-coated, moving between tall fridges and worktops. Once or twice, he emerged from the rear of the shop with trays of barm cakes neatly wrapped and labelled, and deposited them in the chill cabinets round the shop. I figured he was good for a few hours yet and headed back to the office before the traffic wardens came out to play.

I was back just after two. I kept cruising round the block till someone finally left a meter free that gave me a clear view of the exit from the alley behind the sandwich shop. Jazbo emerged in his hot hatch just after three, which was just as well because I was running out of change. I stayed close to him through the city centre, then let a bit of distance grow between us as he headed out past Salford Quays and into the industrial estate round Trafford Park. He pulled up outside a small unit with "Gingerbread House" painted in a rainbow of colours across the front wall, and disappeared inside.

About fifteen minutes later, he emerged with a supermarket

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trolley filled to the top with computer-game boxes. I was baffled. I'd had my own theory about where the packaging was coming from, and it had just been blown out of the water. I hate being wrong. I'd rather unblock the toilet. I let Jazbo drive off, then I marched into Gingerbread House. Ten minutes later, I had all the answers.

Fintan O'Donohoe looked impressed as I laid out my dossier before him. Jazbo's address, photograph, phone number, car-registration number, and place of work would be more than enough to hand him over to the police, gift-wrapped. "So how's this guy getting hold of the gear?" he demanded.

"First thing I wondered about was the shrink-wrapping. That made me think it was someone in your despatch unit. But you were adamant it couldn't be either your mum or your auntie. Then when I found out he worked in a sandwich shop, I realised he must be using their wrap-and-seal gear to cover his boxes in. Which left the question of where the boxes were coming from. You ruled out an inside job, so I thought he might simply be raiding your dustbins for discarded gear. But I was wrong. You ever heard of a charity called Gingerbread House?"

O'Donohoe frowned. "No. Should I have?"

"Your mum has," I told him. "And so, I suspect, has Jazbo's mum or girlfriend or sister. Probably took him along to help them carry some gear. It's an educational charity run by some nuns. They go round businesses and ask them for any surplus materials, and they sell them off to schools and playgroups for next to nothing. They collect all sorts—material scraps, bits of bungee rope, off-cuts of specialist paper, wallpaper catalogues, tinsel, sheets of plastic, scrap paper. Anything that could come in handy for school projects or for costumes for plays, whatever."

Fintan O'Donohoe groaned and put his hands over his face. "Don't tell me . . ."

"They came round here a few months ago, and your mum explained that you don't manufacture here, so there's not much in the way of leftover stuff. But what there was were the boxes from games that had been sent back because they were faulty in some way. The disks were scrapped, and so were the boxes and manuals. If the nuns could make any use of the boxes and their contents . . . They've been dropping them off once a fortnight ever since."

He looked up at me, a ghost of an ironic smile on his lips. "And I was so sure it couldn't be anything to do with my mum!"

"Don't they say charity begins at home?" ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE STOOGE AUDITION

by Dan Stumpf

There was god-awful work on my desk that morning, but I managed to sort through it for ringers and get out of the office before Drinnon showed up. I got to the mall in plenty of time for pie and coffee, so I spread my stuff out at a table in the food court—the movie house wouldn't open for more than an hour.

I killed time going through the paperwork, the harmless stuff, I mean, writing "NTATR" up in the corner of the better part of it. Now and then, just to add some variety, I wrote "NegCon." That took care of most of the stack. The only ones left were the ringers.

Another police officer joins the ranks of crime writers this month with a portrayal of the policeman's life that you won't soon forget. Dan Stumpf emerged as a rookie cop in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, after attending college in the radical sixties. Twenty-two years later he was promoted to police chief, a position he still holds while devoting his spare time to crime fiction. ✝

I looked them over, trying to see anything that might trip me up. There were one or two that I'd have to do something about, and a couple that looked kind of important. I put them in the pile to take care of today, then caught myself; no sense looking *too* good. I marked one of them "NegCon" and put it in the bigger pile.

That left two. They looked harmless enough, but something about them, I don't know, it just hit me wrong. I couldn't quite place it, but

©1996 by Dan Stumpf

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

you don't make a career of screwing off like I do without developing a gut feeling for these things. I studied them, trying to figure out what it was. Then my attention was distracted by a noise in the distance; the movie was opening up. I put everything back in my briefcase, checked it in a locker, and headed over.

I'd seen the flick twice, but it was a good one: plenty of action, lots of skin, and nothing to strain the brain. And the hot buttered popcorn is always fresh for the first show. By the time it was over, I was ready for lunch.

So what with the movie, lunch, and finally checking out the stuff that just wouldn't wait, it was pretty close to quitting time when I got back to work. Even then, I didn't just go right in; I cruised the lot, looking for Drinnon's car. Gone. The lazy so-and-so must've come in late and left early—then gripes about me, I thought. Well, he can holler all he wants. I been in the game too long for even Drinnon to catch me out.

I was just making my way to the cardboard box that some joker with a sick sense of humor calls my "office" when Dibbsy spotted me and called me over.

"Where you been all day, Jake?" He smiled easily. His sleeves were rolled up and his coat off, exposing the gun clipped to his left hip. The butt was battered and scarred, like they always are with lefties. You get used to carrying the damn thing around, and pretty soon you forget it's there. Only if you're left-handed, the butt keeps hitting the car door or something and before long it looks like you carved notches into it like in an old movie. Not that I wouldn't put something like that past Dibbsy. Not with his sense of humor.

"Something hit me this morning," he was saying, "and soon as it did, I thought, this is one for Jake. You'll appreciate this."

I doubted it, but listening to Dibbsy is better than fighting rush-hour traffic, sometimes, so I worked my way into his cubbyhole and squeezed into the extra chair.

"D'joo see *The Three Stooges* last night on Channel 43?" he asked.

I felt this incredible longing to be out in gridlock. Too late now, though. I tried to look interested and apparently did a good enough job for him to go on. "Ever notice how the one guy keeps changing? Sometimes it's Curly, sometimes Shemp, sometimes Curly Joe or that other guy, what's his name. Like they could never keep the slot filled and had to keep going out looking for the third Stooge. You with me so far?"

That's Dibbsy. Whenever the discussion gets real deep, he checks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to make sure class keeps up with it. I nodded and tried to keep my eyes from glazing over. It only encouraged him.

"Well, you ever wonder what the auditions looked like? I keep getting this picture of a big waiting room filled with guys whose suits don't fit, poking each other in the eyes, practicing 'nyuck-nyuck' and 'woo-woo-wa-woo-woo!' and every so often one of 'em gets called in to show his stuff to Larry and Moe. I wonder if they ever saved the screen tests or anything? They'd be worth a fortune."

"I could be wrong, Dibbs—" I pulled myself out of the chair and edged between his desk and the wall as I spoke— "But I get the feeling they only did screen tests for parts like Scarlett O'Hara or Superman, maybe. I always figured to be a Stooge all you had to do was not bruise easy and maybe fall on your ass real neat. Like Drinnon."

"Reminds me." Dibbsy didn't exactly slap his forehead, but he might as well've. "He's looking for you. Drinnon is. Said to steer you to his office soon as you come in."

That's all I needed. "What the hell's he want?" I asked, *and where the hell'd he hide his car?* I wondered. "Can you say you never saw me?"

"Sorry." He didn't look a bit of it. "Lieutenant offered a shiny new quarter to the man who brings you in. And he didn't sound like this was a chewing. Better go see what he's got. And mention my name, would you?"

Sure will, I thought. *And remember to fall down neat and not bruise too easy.*

Drinnon's office was big enough to deserve the name, but just barely. On the wall behind him there was a soft watercolor picture of a dog sleeping on a bed. On the wall behind me, facing him, was a picture of a pirate from some old-time book. I knew the first time I saw it that the dog picture was there just so people talking to Drinnon would relax. It took me a little longer to figure out the picture on the wall facing him was there so no matter how relaxed I—or whoever sat here—got, Drinnon would remember who he was talking to. And what his job was.

Clever guy.

"So how'd it go today, Marley?" He looked me straight in the eye with a kind of lazy, I'm-not-really-listening-so-say-what-you-want look. The look that got him where he is today. "Been trying to get you all day. Catch many bad guys?"

"Not many." You can learn a lot from a guy like Drinnon. I looked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lazily back at him, like there wasn't a thing on my mind. "Most of the stuff today was NTATR. Couple others I couldn't get hold of—I'll try again tomorrow. And you know this damn walkie of mine doesn't pick up for beans in the south end."

"N–T–A–T–R." The way he said it, you could just hear him thinking out the acronym: Nothing To Add To Report. "You been getting a lot of those just lately." He smiled with his mouth. "And I thought I told you to get that walkie looked at."

"I did." I smiled right back at him, "It didn't take. Boyd says it's sunspots. As far as the NTATRs, well, you got the boys in patrol to where they do the scene and follow up all by themselves, sometimes faster and better than we used to do here in the Bureau . . . before you moved over and got the place in shape."

I didn't think it'd do much good to kiss up, but it never hurts, either. And the bit about getting the Detective Bureau in shape might make him think I didn't hold it against him, that month off without pay I got last year when he slipped a ringer into the reports I was supposed to follow up. The brass figured that'd maybe goose me into working for a living, but all it made me do was look over the reports a little closer from then on. And sure enough, I'd found a couple this year with addresses on them that didn't exist, or crimes that never happened. And every time I did, I made out like I didn't know it was Drinnon trying to catch me out again.

And he pretended right back at me that he wasn't sick of the sight of me taking up space in the Detective Bureau, and wasn't doing his damnedest to kick me off. Well, it wasn't a bad game, if you knew how to play it.

". . . the B&E's," he was saying, "you remember the ones Hardy Clyde pulled a few months back? Before Murphy got him? Well, he's out on bond, Hardy is, just sitting around waiting to get sent up, and golly me, somebody's retracing his route. Using his M.O., even. But you probably noticed that when you followed up on 'em today."

I shuffled fast through those reports in my mind. *Yeah, the smash-and-grab on Fourth.* And I tried to breathe a little easier without showing it; it was one I'd followed up on.

"Noticed that myself, sir." I went all thoughtful and concerned. "Nothing to process at the scene, of course, but it was Clyde's style all right." Not that Hardy Clyde ever had anything you could call *style,* unless you count prying open a steel-plate door and ripping everything in your path with a Sears crowbar till you either find some money or hear the heat coming. Hardy was smart enough to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

know he had maybe ten minutes from the time the alarm hit till the black-and-whites showed up, but that was really about as far as his brains went, from all I heard. And even then, he wasn't smart enough to play the averages and figure that sooner or later there'd be a squad car could get there in less than ten minutes.

So now there was a sadder but wiser Officer Murphy on light duty with a special commendation and his arm in a sling. And Hardy Clyde back out on bail.

"Looks like Hardy's trying to raise a little traveling money for when he jumps bond," Drinnon said. "And he's trying to raise it fast and simple, the way he does everything."

"You think?" I could see where this was heading. I mean, I could see two or three places where this might be heading, and all of them looked like more work for me. "I mean, you don't figure he's going to hit *every* place he already knocked over, do you?"

"Imagination never was his strong suit," Drinnon answered. "Anyway, we better play it like it looks: Hardy's our man and he's reliving his youth."

"So you going to put a tail on him?" I sure as hell hoped so. A guy my size doesn't get sent out to work a tail. Maybe this was the time to mention Dibbsy, like he asked me to.

But Drinnon quashed that one in a hurry. "Too much trouble. And too risky; guy follows Hardy Clyde down the wrong alley, he's apt to get his head broke." He looked at me a little wistfully, I thought. "What I need is someone to sit on a couple possible targets. In plainclothes. Unmarked car. And call for backup when he sees something. Kind of a simple job, really, for a man of your talents, but . . ."

There was more. Lots more. But why go into it? I said I had sick friends to visit that night, or sick parents, maybe, and Drinnon looked sad and offered to call them. I told him my back was killing me and he offered to set me up with the department MedCare facility. I told him . . . Hell, I forget what all I told him, and he had some snide answer for everything till it was easier just to say yessir and ask where he wanted me.

"Fifth and High." He rose from his desk and put his coat on, ready to call it a day. "Hardy hit three stores in that block and hasn't come back to any of them yet." He opened the door to leave, waiting for me to get up, but I decided to be a little obtuse myself and just sat there. Drinnon looked down at me a minute, then said, "Marley,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that wasn't you Dibbs saw going into the Cinemark this morning, was it?"

Think fast. Chances were Dibbsy hadn't seen diddly. Or told Drinnon if he had. But where did Drinnon get the name of the theater? Better play dumb.

"Not me, Lieutenant." I got up, though. "I learned my lesson about that last year."

"Thought so." Drinnon reached out into the crease between my belly and my belt. Pulled out a piece of popcorn and popped it in his mouth. Smiled at me. "Just checking."

So at two in the morning I was sitting in one of those dark blue Chevys they call unmarked, running the engine to keep warm, listening to the radio, reading *Playboy,* and eating a sandwich. *You can lead a horse to water, Drinnon, but I'm damned if I'll raise your stock by catching anyone with those cute ideas of yours.* I turned up the radio and turned on the parking lights. *Nobody but a damn idiot would try anything now.*

And you guessed it.

I'd just finished the *Playboy* and got out of the car to see if there was a good place to go, stretching and blinking in the cold, looking up and down the street, hearing the faint rising and falling whine of someone's alarm. . . .

Hell!

I blinked, suddenly realizing what the sound meant. Listening to the radio, I hadn't heard a damn thing; hadn't seen a damn thing, reading the magazine. And someone, most likely Hardy Clyde, had busted a store almost right in front of me. I could see shards of glass on the sidewalk, shining in the soft red neon light a few doors down. *Damn!* I started practicing up reasons why I hadn't seen it, wondering if there was time for me to drive off and say I was on a potty break when it happened. How long had that damn alarm been going off?

Then I heard the high-pitched crunch of someone walking on broken glass. A shadow slung across the shards on the sidewalk, blotting out the red light, and Hardy Clyde hulked out of the door, stuffing a wad of bills in his pocket with the hand that wasn't carrying the crowbar.

He looked up and down the street. Right at me, then away again. Then back. It was like he saw me and figured one fat man standing around on the sidewalk, more or less, wasn't enough to bother with.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I couldn't see his eyes in the streetlights, I could just kind of feel them pass over me without much interest. Then they settled on my car.

And he started lumbering over.

Hell.

Things ran through my mind quick, none of them too pleasant. I had a gun, snapped in a holster buttoned under my trenchcoat; Hardy and his crowbar could knock the top of my head clean into next month before I got anywhere near it. I had a radio to call for backup, sitting on the seat of the car, three feet and a million miles away; and Hardy Clyde was a helluva lot closer than the nearest squad car.

Hell.

He looked for a minute like he was going to just ignore me, get in the car, and drive off. Jeez, I think if it'd been running I would have just let him. No such luck. Hardy's eyes—I could see them now, flat and brown and completely without expression—went from the half-open door with the dome light on, to the quiet hood, and then over to me, standing on the sidewalk like some dumb clown getting ready for a pie in the face. He never broke stride, just kept coming, swinging the crowbar ever so slightly at his side.

Like I said, you don't make a career out of screwing off like I do without picking up a few tricks. And much as I hate anything that has to do with police work as a rule, it looked like there was just no other way to keep the mayor from coming to my funeral.

Hell.

I took a step back, trying not to look like I was going to turn and run, trying to keep distance between us but not provoke Hardy into any fast moves. He hadn't figured me for armed and dangerous yet, so just let him think I was some schlub on the street, hustling to give him whatever he wanted. I pulled the car keys from my pocket and half threw them to him so they landed on the sidewalk between us.

Hardy wasn't quite as dumb as I hoped. If he'd stopped and reached down for the keys I could've stepped up, kicked his face in, and shot him three times while he figured it out. But he just wasn't as stupid as all that. His big foot went over the car keys and the hand holding the crowbar swept back just a little farther and faster as his other foot went forward.

Well, I'm not as stupid as all that, either. He'd walked far enough by that time for me to measure his stride, and when he swung that crowbar, I was clear of it by a good two or three inches. I gotta say,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

though, the cool *swissh* as it went past my nose didn't do my spirits any good. But I still had enough reflex to step up, catch his wrist on the backswing, and pivot around, throwing him headfirst into my car.

That was the plan, anyway. Trouble was, he was just too big to go swinging around, and I don't pivot worth a damn. What we managed to do was go waltzing around and around each other, Hardy trying to reach out with his free hand and pull my head off while I tried to keep him off balance enough not to do that. I had both my arms around his right, and while I was at it I worked at pulling the crowbar from that big, hard fist of his. I couldn't quite do it, but I got enough leverage to jerk it down real solid. There was a faint cracking sound—from his wrist or mine, I couldn't be sure—and then he stumbled and I managed to dance him into the wall.

That's something else that didn't go quite my way that night; if he'd hit his head on the damn wall, I'd have been home free. But he just hit his shoulder, hard enough to prop himself back up and start to get steady again.

Hell.

So there was nothing for it but to grab his right arm a little tighter and start dancing him around the *other* way, hoping I could slam his head into a wall before he could do mine, and incidentally twisting on the crowbar as much as I could, which wasn't very damn much, till suddenly we got our feet tangled around each other like some damn Stooge audition. I kicked his shin, and we fell on our asses.

Or he did, anyway. I fell on top of him, and from that point on, the fight was over. I don't know a whole lot about street combat, but when a guy my size gets on top, it takes a hell of a lot to get him off. And Hardy just didn't have much left in him. I'd sprained his wrist, kicked his shins, fallen on him, and he hadn't touched me, hardly. And he wasn't going to, either. I just stayed on top of him, keeping his arms down, yelling "POLICE!" and gouging his eyes when I thought it was safe, till we both heard the siren in the background and he went limp, the crowbar clattering into the gutter beside us.

I picked it up and cracked him gently upside the head with it. I could always say it happened while we were fighting, and besides, I just thought of something.

The sirens were getting louder. Just time for me to pull the wad of bills from Hardy's pocket. *Jeez,* must be a couple thousand: a nice down payment on that month's pay I lost last year. I didn't stick it in my pocket, though. There was a storm drain close, and,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

acting like I was trying valiantly to get to my feet, just in case anyone was watching, I got my hand into the grating and wedged the bills tight up under it. They'd stay there till I was ready to come back for them.

The squad cars got there about a second later, and damned if Drinnon himself didn't show up a little after that, all concerned for my safety and everything. Screw him. The harness bulls took Hardy away, the crime scene guys started photographing and searching, and Internal Affairs asked me for a routine statement; they didn't like that crease on Hardy's skull one bit.

But there was nothing they could do about it. And nothing they could do about the money, either, even though they never did find it. Hardy sure didn't know a thing about it, and it was windy enough that night that the bills *could've* blown away. I suggested that. And that the store owner might've lied for the insurance company. Drinnon just looked ticked and gritted his teeth when the commissioner put a commendation in my file.

So all that's left is to go back for the money. And I'll do it someday, when Drinnon gives up. I started to get it just a week after they hauled Hardy to state prison for twenty years, but I don't know . . . I was there, it was late, no one around, but I got this real creepy feeling when I got close to the storm drain. Like Drinnon knew it was there all along, and this whole thing of letting me get it was just his own private stooge audition, just for me.

So I didn't even slow down enough to look like I wanted into the storm drain. I'll get it, though. Hell, Drinnon practically owes me that money, and I'll get it. One of these days. ●

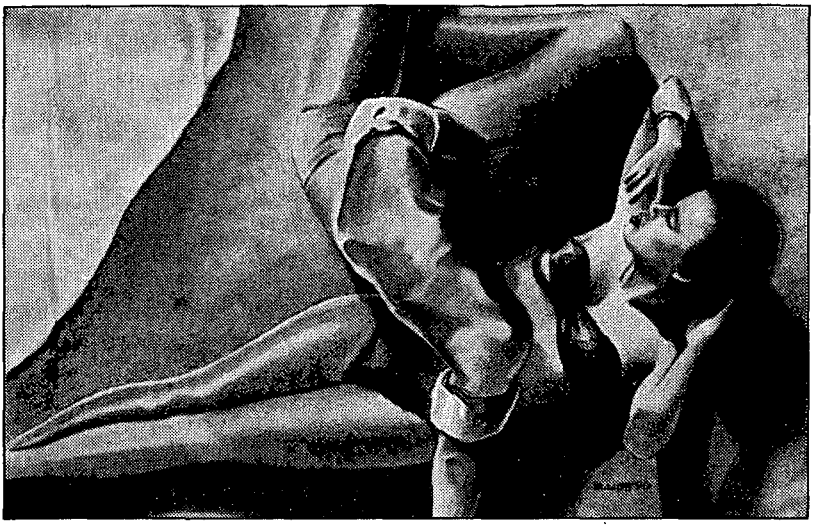
Period Crime

by Rex Ponti

© 1996 by Rex Ponti

A stuck-up Victorian fop
Ker-bludgeoned his tight-fisted pop
When sentenced to die,
He said with a sigh,
"Oh, what shall I wear to the drop?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Darryl Elliott

THE SCHEMER'S HOLIDAY

by Phil Lovesey

Three strides and he leapt from the cliff.

A hundred-foot drop, easily, to the churning sea and jagged rocks below. The blood-red sun on the horizon stopped sinking. From his view it was rising. The whole ocean rushed to break his fall. His hair stood on end. His stomach, lungs, heart, and liver seemed jammed against his throat. The roar of cold air was deafening as he cut through the night towards the indigo sea. The descent should have been quick, yet his brain switched to slow motion, reliving events that had led to the jump.

Had it only been a week since he first ventured onto the beach?

"Hey, mister, can't you swim, then?"

Paul Rogers ignored the young boy, and stared at the clear blue Mediterranean Sea lapping between his toes. How he had grown to hate the water.

© 1996 by Phil Lovesey

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A third clever story from Phil Lovesey, whose two previous outings for *EQMM* were among the best plotted mystery short stories we've seen in recent years. Since last appearing in *EQMM,* Mr. Lovesey has sold stories for publication in Czechoslovakia and started work on his first crime novel.

"What do you need them armbands for? It makes you look stupid."

"Sometimes people need to look stupid," said Paul, watching the confused child run back up the tiny beach towards the safety of its sunbathing mother. He had to admit that the boy was right, though. The orange reflective armbands, which wouldn't be given a second glance if worn by a child, had already attracted sideways looks from others. Well, to hell with them. He'd come to Minorca with one aim in mind, and no one would put him off now.

He took another half-step into the water. Toddlers sat slapping the sea just inches from him, filling brightly coloured buckets with the stuff he loathed. He congratulated himself on not panicking. Others would surely have turned tail and run for the nearest bar, dumping the accursed armbands at the first opportunity. Paul allowed himself a smile. He had planned this for so long. No amount of ridicule would deter him. Indeed, it was essential to the outcome, and not just to spur him on.

"You'll never learn unless you take the plunge."

He turned round to face the girl, recognizing her immediately. He'd noticed her on the first day, long auburn hair and a figure to die for. A dream on legs, young, vibrant, and completely absorbing in her vitality. "I'm worried about all the sharks," he replied with a grin.

"This is Minorca." She laughed, flashing perfect teeth. "The sharks here cruise the discos, not the sea."

"Really? Then what's this Great White bearing down on me now?" She followed his gaze towards an inward-bound swirl of splashing foam scything its way through youngsters waist-deep in the sea. Ten feet from Paul, it rolled onto its back, whooped with joy, and yelled an expletive which echoed in thick Mancunian around the sheltered cove.

"That's Russell," she replied apologetically. "He's more of an ape

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than a shark. One of the last of the Great White Chauvinists. He's an endangered species, you know."

"And I take it you're part of the breeding programme? My name's Paul." He held out his hand. The feeling of hers in his was exquisite.

"Karen," she replied. "And Russell belongs to Cherie. He's really not my type. Good luck, anyway."

He watched as she made her way over to a bright sun-lounger. The undersides of his feet were starting to wrinkle, but he felt good, no matter how foolish he looked. He had tested the waters and made a start. That was all that mattered.

He spent the rest of the afternoon walking in the bright sunshine along the coastal path to the north of the resort. In truth, he preferred his own company, and a brisk stroll along the clifftops was the perfect reward for his morning's efforts. Later, he made his way back to his apartment, stopping at the supermarket to pick up some supplies. He had great admiration for the Minorcan approach to tourism. Newly constructed holiday villages offered every amenity for the British holidaymaker, teeming with whitewashed bars, restaurants, and supermarkets boasting Britain's top-selling brands alongside Minorcan delicacies. Many need never leave this little sunny "England" at all, he mused, which was almost certainly the underlying architectural intention. Cala Blanes was probably Europe's most luxurious open prison.

He was back down on the beach by eleven the next day, standing up to his shins in the clear blue sea.

"Once your backside's wet, it's plain sailing."

"Believe you me, Karen, if I was out on a boat I'd feel a lot happier. How are you today?"

She grimaced. "Rather fragile, I'm afraid. Cherie, Russell, and I spent too much time and money in the Bavaria Bar last night."

He knew the place. Loud music, drunken teenagers, and a "Happy Hour" which lasted all night. "Rather you than me."

"It was Russell's idea," she replied defensively. "He goes for the cheap beer. Cherie eyes up the men, and I just play gooseberry."

"You're not here with anyone yourself, then?"

"No. I came with them, they're good friends."

A silence descended between them, both scanning the horizon for nothing in particular. Introductions had been made, interest had been established, personal circumstances revealed. It was the moment Paul always dreaded. Wait too long and she would be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gone; ask too quickly and appear desperate. He felt the age gap between them as a yawning chasm, yet the very fact that she had approached him twice flattered him immensely. Surely there could be no confusing the signs?

"I can't believe you haven't left a brokenhearted guy back in England."

She smiled, accepting the compliment, however corny. "I could teach you," she said. "I could teach you to swim right here."

He looked at the bright blue eyes twinkling with excitement. "Karen, there's something you should know. I'm thirty-one years old."

"You're never too old to learn," she teased, taking his hand and leading him gently into deeper water.

It was all going too fast. He gripped her hand tightly as the sea slapped against his thighs. "I don't want to go in too deep, Karen. Please, no further than this."

She smiled reassuringly. "The secret is learning to relax and enjoy it. It's extremely salty here; you'll float like a cork, I promise. Just try it, Paul, try falling forward and floating."

He looked at the young face, beckoning him on. She was right, he had to make a real start. Taking his deepest breath, he fell forward. Instantly the salted water rushed into every facial orifice, as his feet frantically scrambled to grip the sandy bottom. Then he was out, coughing and spluttering, to acknowledge Karen's enthusiastic applause.

"That's the hardest part," she said. "We'll have you swimming like a dolphin before the week's out."

"Yeah, well, right now *I'm out,"* said Paul, heading towards the beach. "I need a drink. How about you?"

They headed straight for one of the many bars set on the resort's main street and sat outside drinking beer in the midday sun.

"Don't you think it's weird?" said Karen. "We've hardly met, yet here we are drinking together in little more than our underwear."

"We British can't wait to strip off," replied Paul. "The locals must find it hilarious. Thousands of dreadful white bodies on display the moment the temperature reaches over seventy. No wonder they keep us all here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the freedom we're given. It's on their terms, isn't it?"

Karen sipped at her beer. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"There's more to Minorca than a few bars and the beach, Karen.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ciudadela, the old Moorish capital, is only five minutes by car. It's really stunning, the light is exquisite."

Karen leaned forward, studying his face closely. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a photographer."

"I knew it," she said. "I had you down as the artistic type. Look, I'll make a deal with you. I'll spend an hour a day teaching you to swim, if you show me a little of your 'real Minorca.' "

"Isn't it supposed to be me who asks you out?"

She laughed. "It's not a date, Paul. You're really not my type, I'm sorry."

He raised his glass to hers. "I'm relieved," he said. "As a traditionalist I couldn't stand to be picked up by a young girl, however beautiful. Cheers, it's a deal. By the way, what exactly is your 'type'?"

She thought for a moment. "He's got to be a hero. Really brave. Mega brave. And before you ask; I haven't met him, and I'm not likely to here, either. There was a fireman once, but a Mrs. fireman too."

"Did you have a blazing row?"

She pulled a face.

"Are you as hungry as I am?" he asked. "Let me buy you lunch, Karen, and I promise you there won't be a single bad joke in the place."

"Give me twenty minutes," she replied.

Paul picked Karen up in his hired car from her hotel and travelled the two miles south on the coast road to Ciudadela. Here, guidebook in hand, they walked the labyrinth of cobbled streets which surround the beige stone cathedral. At length, they wandered down to the harbourside to eat seafood paella, watching the Minorcan world go by. At five, they headed back to Cala Blanes, Paul dropping his newfound swimming teacher back at her hotel.

"Thanks," she said, stepping from the car. "It does you good to get out, doesn't it?"

"I always try to immerse myself in as many different cultures as possible. It expands my mind."

"Liar," she said. "It's intellectual snobbery, that's all."

"Maybe," said Paul, "but didn't those fresh prawns taste good?"

"Let's put you to the test, then," Karen countered. "How about expanding your mind in the Bavaria Bar tonight? Cherie and Rus-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sell will give you a real culture shock. Are you man enough?"

"Is this what a hero would do?" Paul teased, watching her blush for the first time. She closed the car door and walked inside the hotel.

The Bavaria Bar stands halfway along Cala Blanes's main street, one of several bars whose music systems compete for tourist pesetas throughout the night. The walls are lined with a random mosaic of photographs depicting sunburnt, drunken revellers. Paul made his way downstairs at ten, stopping at the fruit machine to adjust to the light. Happy Hour was in full swing, and tired Minorcan barmen struggled to keep up with demands for drink. Perhaps Karen was right, he thought. Surely stay-away intellectual snobbery was preferable to this?

"Marine Boy. Over here, mate." Paul recognised the booming voice from the previous day at the cove. Turning, he saw Russell and Karen sitting at a corner table and instantly regretted wearing a tie. Worse still, he noticed Karen hadn't changed from the afternoon, and Russell wore only blue shorts and a football shirt. He waved Paul over with a crutch.

"Only done my leg, haven't I? Fourth bleeding day, an' all. Holiday over. Nice to meet you, mate. Karen's told us heaps." Paul shook the powerful hand and sat down, carefully avoiding the fresh plaster cast on Russell's outstretched right leg. Karen smiled, encouraging him into the conversation.

"How did it happen?"

"Water-skiing, Paul. One minute I'm up, arms being wrenched from their sockets, next I'm history. Wave cuts in from the left and I've no chance. Well, what do you expect? It's the Spanish through and through. Can't drive on the roads, let alone the bloody water. It's a national disgrace. Took me to the hospital at Quitadelly . . ."

"Ciudadela," said Paul softly.

". . . wherever, mate, wherever. You've never seen such a shambles of a town. Half of it should be condemned. Thank heavens they built this place, away from all that. Sorted, we are." He paused to take an enormous swig of his beer, replenishing his glass from a jug on the table. "Help yourself, Paul. Cherie's at the bar, sorting the drinks."

Paul saw Karen smirk. He removed his jacket and loosened his tie.

"That's better. Relax a bit. Karen tells us you're learning to swim."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She's offered to teach me," said Paul.

"And you're a photographer?" continued Russell. "Do any porn?"

"Yes," replied Paul.

"No, you're joking!" Russell exclaimed in awe.

"Well, you have to start somewhere, Russell."

"Paul does a lot of commercial work," Karen explained slowly. "But he's extremely modest about it. I've been pressing him all day, but he's not giving much away."

"He's got something to hide, then," Russell slurred, as a petite blonde in a glittering T-shirt joined them at the table with a tray of drinks. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked. "Eyeing up the barman?"

"Paul," said Karen, "this is Cherie."

Looking back, he would remember the horror of that introduction more than any other moment of the holiday. As their eyes met, both were startled into silence. His throat dried in an instant. It was her. He just couldn't believe it. Surely the odds against it were billions to one? The same holiday, at the same time of year, the same bar, the same friends? In the shocked silence between them, he was grateful for just one thing. She seemed just as terrified as he was.

"Pleased to meet you, Paul. Karen's told us a lot about you."

"He knows all that," barked Russell. "Where's the change from the drinks, then?"

Paul sat, stunned. Their eyes met nervously for a second time. They needed to talk, alone. But how?

"Cherie's an aspiring actress. She's at drama school in Manchester," Karen said helpfully.

"She can play the tart, all right. Not a bad looker, though," said Russell. "What do you reckon, Paul? Could she make it as a model?"

"It's not my side of the business," stammered Paul. Cherie must have remembered him. After all, the incident was only six weeks or so ago. He noticed a glint in her eye as she leaned closer to him.

"And what exactly is 'your side of the business,' Mr. Photographer?"

"Mostly tabletop stuff," he replied, swallowing hard. "Product shots for press ads."

"And where do you work, Paul?" Christ, she was trying it on! He was tempted to leave at once, but didn't Cherie also have something to hide? What if Russell was to find out about their little

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

encounter in the changing room? He didn't look the type to take the news gently.

"Chelmsford. I work in Chelmsford," he replied, meeting her eyes steadily to call her bluff.

Russell belched loudly above the pounding music. "I reckon he does all that naughty stuff, you know, 'glamour' photography."

"Haven't you got relatives in Chelmsford, Cherie?" Karen asked suddenly, causing a bead of sweat to trickle down Paul's back.

"Yes, my mother. I'm down there quite a lot."

Karen revelled in the coincidence. "You two will have to meet up, then."

"Who says we haven't already?" Cherie replied, sipping her drink with a smile.

"No, I don't think so," said Paul hastily. "If you'll just excuse me a minute."

Russell used his crutch to indicate where the toilets could be found through the mass of bodies. "It's this Spanish beer. Goes straight through me too."

When he came out, Cherie had left the table to meet him.

"Perhaps you should buy some drinks," she suggested, pulling him towards the bar. "Quite a shock, isn't it?"

He came straight to the point. There seemed little reason for any pleasantries. "What do you want?"

"You like Karen, don't you? All these swimming lessons and cultural afternoons. Very cozy. I could tell her some very interesting things about her new friend."

Paul was quick to counter. "Let's not leave Russell out of this. Won't he be suprised to learn what you get up to when you visit your mother?"

They stood queuing four-deep at the bar. Cherie changed tack. "You're here on your own. Self-catering apartment, according to Karen."

"So?"

"I want the key."

"You what?"

"I have plans for the next week or so," she said, winking provocatively at one of the barmen. "And after Russell's little accident, he won't be able to keep an eye on me anymore. You'll be out with Karen most afternoons, so you won't need the apartment. I want the key."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You must be crazy! In my apartment? What about Russell? He'll kill you."

"Russell," she said slowly, "will never know. He'll be hobbling between the bar and the beach all day thinking that I am simply soaking up a little of the local flavour myself." The barman returned a lecherous smile. "Which, of course, I will be, in a manner of speaking."

"So this is blackmail? My key for your silence?"

Cherie smiled. "This way, we both have our fun and keep our secrets. We're on holiday, don't spoil it all now. It couldn't have worked out any better."

"You're a schemer."

"Nonsense. There's a way of turning every situation to one's advantage, that's all."

Paul paid for the drinks. "And you won't say a word to Karen?"

"Why should I?" she replied. "Just think of your apartment key as insurance."

He thought for a moment before replying, "It's number seventeen, the little road third up from the beach. I'll leave it under the sun-lounger round the back. Be out by five. And I know nothing about this, Cherie."

They returned to the table, Russell enthusiastically welcoming another round of drinks. Paul smiled weakly at Karen and cursed having ever laid eyes on Cherie. The awful irony was that eyes were all he really had laid on her. He remembered the incident vividly. She had teased and displayed herself in front of him throughout the afternoon. He had been in the job too long to pay her any special attention. When you spend most of your working life with semi-naked women, one more makes no difference. He was sated by it all, a situation Cherie hadn't bargained for.

They had a changing area for the girls, and after the session Cherie had asked him to help find her purse. He told her to get help from one of his female assistants, but she insisted there was nobody around. In a mistake that led to his current predicament, he did two foolish things. Firstly, he followed her into the changing room, and secondly, spurned her advances when she stood naked in front of him. He was a professional and didn't mix business with pleasure. Cherie wasn't the sort to take rejection lightly, and had peppered him with the foulest abuse as he left to pack away his equipment. And that was that, until now.

He spent the rest of the evening in strained conversation, hop-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing Karen would put his unease down to the rowdiness of the bar. In his mind he felt utterly trapped. To tell Karen the truth about Cherie would reveal too much about the nature of his work. He liked the fact that Karen believed him to be an advertising photographer. He looked into her radiant smile. The stakes were too high to come clean.

A heat wave settled over the island during the next few days. Karen kept her side of the bargain, diligently teaching Paul a basic doggy paddle in the cove. The afternoons were spent exploring the delights of Fornells, Es Torro, Santa Galdana, and the many hidden coastal paths and beaches found by only the most adventurous travellers. He pushed Cherie and their "arrangement" to the back of his mind, always returning alone to his apartment after five to remake the bed and empty the ashtrays. The evenings were spent together as a foursome, Russell complaining he didn't see enough of Cherie in the afternoons, Cherie explaining that the break was doing them both some good.

After five days, Karen's patience was rewarded as she watched Paul splash an ungainly twenty metres toward her without armbands. She hugged him closely as he frantically trod water to stay afloat.

"You're no Mark Spitz," she laughed, "but you'll do."

"People will do anything if the bait's right."

She kissed his cheek and swam languidly back to shore. Paul followed, arms aching from the unnatural style. Why couldn't she have taught him a basic breaststroke? He collapsed beside her on the baking sand, breathless from the exertion. The next question hit him with the force of a tidal wave.

"Paul, have you always been entirely honest with me?"

He said nothing, heart pounding.

"I believe honesty is everything in a relationship," she continued, "especially between friends."

"I agree," he panted, leaving the first question unanswered.

"Last night, after you dropped me at the hotel, I saw Cherie kissing the barman from the Bavaria Bar. She didn't see me."

"Are you sure?" asked Paul nervously, feeling storm clouds gathering in the bright blue sky. Karen turned and looked him straight in the eye. "She's been having an affair. She hasn't been looking around the island at all. If she wanted to she would have come with us, wouldn't she?"

"I don't think it does any good to jump to conclusions, Karen."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I've known Cherie for eight years, Paul. She's an outrageous flirt. I tell you, she's been seeing that barman during the afternoons. And with Russell's leg in plaster, what can he do about it? I think I should tell him."

Panic-stricken, Paul fumbled for the words. "You can't do that. Anything could happen. It's madness."

Karen thought for a moment, considering her options. "You're right," she agreed. "I can't tell him, Cherie has to. They're both my friends, Paul, and I can't stand to know one is being deceived. I'll tell Cherie what I know, then let her tell Russell. Or I will."

"Karen, that's blackmail. You can't!"

"Paul, you yourself agreed. Honesty between friends is everything. If I did nothing I would be dishonest."

Paul's mind struggled to find a flaw in the idealistic logic. "Can't you just pretend you didn't see it?"

"Then I'm not being honest with myself, am I? I'll speak to Cherie back at the hotel tonight. Then it's up to her. Don't look so worried," she chided him. "Honesty always pays in the long run."

For Paul, it was a long run back to his apartment. Karen's words rang in his ears. He'd just been dishonest to her, saying he needed to shower before they met for lunch. Cherie was already there when he arrived, outraged it was he and not her lover knocking at the door. He breathlessly relayed the conversation with Karen, as Cherie paced the floor nervously.

"You're the schemer," he said. "Get us out of this one."

He watched as she sat down and smoked a cigarette. She said nothing for three minutes until her face broke into a broad smile.

"Didn't you say you wanted to do some sunset photography?"

Paul nodded.

"Then I have a plan," Cherie enthused. "A plan which uses our combined talents to the full. And what's more, at the end of it Russell will be begging to have me back whatever the cost, and Karen," she looked at Paul slyly, "will have won herself her first real hero."

Paul listened in grudging admiration to the plan. She could certainly think on her feet. Together they explored every loophole, rehearsing each other's roles in it. After half an hour Paul had to admit it was watertight, especially from his perspective. Swept along in her confidence, he agreed to see it through.

"Go now," she said. "I'll speak to Karen later, then see you later still."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He spent the rest of the afternoon trying to disguise his nerves as he explored the inland town of Mercadal with Karen. On their return to the resort, he asked her to keep him company later that night while he took some shots of the sun setting high up on the cliffs.

"It's just a twenty-minute walk from your hotel," he explained. "And I couldn't face another night in that damned bar."

"I'd love to. I'm not going to feel like celebrating after I've spoken to Cherie."

"Well, don't say anything then," tried Paul for the last time.

"Pick me up at seven," she replied firmly, spotting Cherie walking towards the hotel. "I'm just about to wipe that smile off her face."

He watched as she followed Cherie inside. He had two hours to spare, and his hands were already starting to shake. He broke the habit of a lifetime, found the nearest bar, and drank a beer on his own.

He was back at the hotel at seven to find Karen, Cherie, and Russell waiting for him. Karen came over and kissed his cheek.

"Cherie insists they come with us," she said.

"What happened? Did you tell her?"

"She's really sorry," said Karen. "She's going to tell him tonight, and she wants some friends around. I can understand that."

He shot a nervous glance at Cherie, who nodded silently back. "Why does it have to be in front of us?" he protested. "It's too embarrassing."

"Please?" she begged.

"Okay," he wearily replied. "But only for you."

"Spoken like a true hero," she teased, beckoning the others over. "Let's go, then."

They made slow progress through the resort and up onto the high coastal path. Russell had quickened his pace with crutch and plaster cast, but still couldn't match the others for speed. He cursed and swore at the futility of the expedition, making the others promise him extra beer for his pains.

The wind was quickening, churning the sea below. They walked on for another ten minutes, following the tiny path which never strayed more than twenty feet from the barren cliff edge. Eventually they arrived at Paul's chosen spot, and he set about erecting his foldaway tripod and camera.

"Right," said Russell. "Take the bloody thing and let's go. A man could die of thirst up here."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The light's not right yet," Paul replied, scanning the horizon. "The sun's too high in the sky. But don't let me keep you, Russell."

"Cherie, you heard the man. Let's go. Karen, it's been an education."

Cherie stood a few feet from the sheer drop, staring out to sea, shoulders heaving as she began to sob. Karen went to her, extending a comforting arm and an encouraging nod. Paul's palms began to sweat as he felt the dread moment approach. She turned to Russell, backlit by the golden sun.

"Russell, there's something I have to tell you," she began slowly. "Something that's going to hurt you very much."

"Bloody hell, you're not pregnant, are you?"

She wiped away a tear and paused for effect. "I've been seeing another man, Russell. And I've been sleeping with him in the afternoons. I'm so sorry. I love you so much."

Paul watched as Russell struggled to accept the truth. He was fighting against it, his face contorting with the effort. His voice cracked and trembled with anger and shock.

"Here?" he pathetically squeaked. "While I've been laid up with my leg, you've been . . ."

Cherie nodded, bursting into piteous weeping.

"You callous bitch! And you drag me all the way up here to tell me in front of these two?" He shot Paul a vicious look. "I barely know him, for Christ's sake. So help me, I'm going to kill you!"

Karen screamed as Russell limped maniacally towards the cliff edge. "You won't need to," Cherie cried out, turning towards the sea once more. "Do you think I can live with myself after this? I'm sorry, Russell, I really am. Forgive me."

She jumped the instant before Russell reached her. Karen screamed as Paul rushed to drag Russell away from the drop.

"Just get back!" he shouted, pulling the bigger man to the ground. "And stay there!" He kicked off his shoes and strode back to the cliff edge.

"What are you doing?" screamed Karen.

"Just run and get help. Fast!"

With three short strides, he too was over. Time stood still as he fell. He heard Russell's desperate pleas for Cherie drift away as he plunged towards the sea. He thanked every god in Heaven that the cliff was so sheer. Here, he would hit deep water rather than jagged rock.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The world exploded around him. He sank fast. When would he stop to start for the surface? His head rang with the pain of entry.

At last he felt himself rise, until finally one arm broke free from the water to touch air. He was alive. Gasping, he struggled to see through the swell. Surely Cherie couldn't be far away? Her shrill voice reached him above the roar, and he made his way frantically to it. The crude doggy paddle was useless in the conditions, leaving him defenceless against the powerful incoming tide. She was thirty metres away, and going down for the third time. The last he saw of her was a look of utter bewilderment on her face. Then he was washed onto the rocks, and using the last of his failing strength, pulled himself out before the next wave broke over him. Climbing painfully to a safer ledge, he lay back and waited for help to arrive.

Three days after the tragedy, Paul finally completed his challenge. To his satisfaction, it was Karen herself who suggested it. They'd been consoling Russell in the Bavaria Bar when she suddenly whispered her intentions in his ear. The act itself was nothing memorable; for Paul it rarely ever was. Just the end of a well-planned campaign.

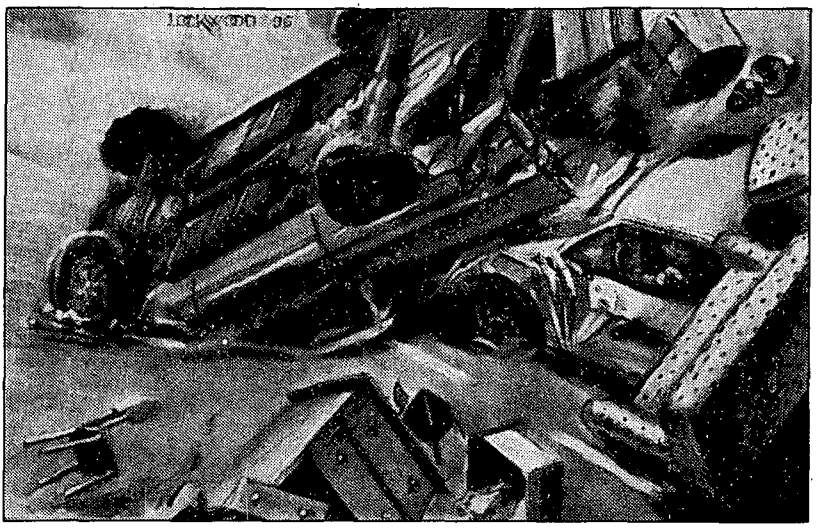
As she slept peacefully in his arms, he allowed himself a smile. This had been the toughest one so far. Yet in a strange way, Cherie's unplanned role in events had proved the deciding factor. Not to mention Karen's highbrow morality. His mind wandered lazily back to the clifftop. Cherie's drama-school training had turned in an Oscar-winning performance. What a loss to the stage she was.

He just had one last little scheme to hatch. How to end it with Karen before they flew back? He couldn't risk her coming down from Manchester to visit, and discovering the vital factor Cherie had gambled on so fatally. Poor Cherie. It was a wonderful plan, but she had overlooked the obvious flaw. He had only to make the jump to be a hero in Karen's eyes; he didn't have to save Cherie. And when she died, his secret died with her.

Paul turned and embraced Karen again. He'd think of a way of letting her down gently. He always did. He'd learned to value his thinking time, and had trained his mind to make the most of it. Especially at work.

What else is there to do but sit and scheme—when you're the lifeguard at the local swimming pool? ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Todd Lockwood

GREEN AS GRASS

by Doug Allyn

It was a great-looking accident. A battered pickup truck crammed with secondhand furniture had sideswiped a coffee-colored Cadillac and gone end over end, scattering chairs, lamps, and chunks of a cheap dinette set all over the four-lane. The truck was upside down in the middle of the road now, its windshield shattered, its roof hammered halfway down to the doorlocks. The Caddy's nose was crumpled against the truck's rear bumper, as though it was nuzzling it, trying to help it up. Very artistic.

A salt-and-pepper team of Michigan state troopers were on their knees beside the pickup, desperately working to get the driver out of the cab. So far, no luck. The doors were jammed shut and he was pinned by the wheel. Still, he had to be alive or the cops wouldn't be bothering with him. His passenger wasn't as lucky. He was sprawled in the road near the truck, as lifeless and misshapen as a hanging scarecrow on Halloween. Dynamite.

©1996 by Doug Allyn

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We'll set up the shoot on the centerline," Cass said quietly, easing the KVLT News car to a halt and flipping on its emergency flashers. "If we nail this quick, we can still make the six-o'clock news. It's a flashy crash, maybe hot enough for A-bag."

"But . . . shouldn't we talk to the police first?" Wilona Klein said uncertainly. "We don't actually know what happened."

"An accident happened," Cass growled, grabbing his Panasonic Steadycam and climbing out. "One dead, one still in danger. And if you get the lead out I can frame your standup with a body on one side of you and the cops struggling valiantly on the other. Mary freakin' Poppins could pass for a reporter in a shot like this. Now move it, Klein, before some gawker decides to cover up our stiff!"

Wilona gamely took a stance on the centerline, checked her mike, and patted her hair into place. A lost cause. Her anchorwoman's bouffant looked like a hairy helmet, completely dominating her narrow sparrow face. Her makeup helped a little but in her official "K-Volt" blue blazer and white blouse she looked like a kid playing dress up. Which, in effect, she was.

Cass backed away to get the whole scene in the shot, then zeroed in on Wilona. He softened the focus on her face a little. Wilona was a film-school grad and a hard worker, but she had flat cheekbones that didn't photograph well, especially under all that hair. Her career as a TV newswoman was on the slow track to nowhere. Which put it on a par with his own. "All set," he called. She counted to three with her fingers.

"This is Wilona Klein reporting live for KVLT news. We're at the scene of a terrible accident, here on . . ." She hesitated, looking to Cass for help.

"We're on the Dixie, south of Reynolds," Cass snapped. "Take it again from the top."

"Sorry," she said. "This is Wilona—OhmyGod! Cass, look out!"

Cass heard the shriek of brakes behind him. The Steadycam's

Doug Allyn has been writing short stories at a prodigious rate lately—good news for *EQMM* readers, who have voted his work first in the Readers Award competition three of the last four years. We will be featuring another new non-series story from the Michigan author next month. †

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

internal gyro kept him from turning quickly so he lunged sharply to his left, sprinting toward the shoulder of the road. He glimpsed a car coming on as he ran, a green car, out of control. It careened off a gawker's station wagon in a shower of sparks. Cass dove headlong over the hood of the police car as the green car hurtled past and slammed full tilt into the rear of the white KVLT sedan.

He landed hard on his left shoulder, instinctively protecting the camera. He lay there a moment, shaken, trying to gather his wits, then staggered to his feet. The green car had welded itself to the trunk of the KVLT sedan. Instinctively, Cass shouldered the Steadycam and began filming. The driver slowly raised his head and looked about, stunned. Then he picked up a cellular phone and made a call. Cass was centering the driver's face in the shot when he noticed an orange glow in the corner of the viewfinder. Fire. The damned car was burning. And the driver was sitting there dazed, muttering into the phone, making no move to get out. Damn!

It was a cameraman's nightmare. Every professional instinct, honed by his years in the business, told Cass to keep filming. Focus. Get the shot. The cops would get the guy out. The cops . . . were hauling the injured man out of the pickup. They weren't aware of the fire. Or were too busy to care.

Cass locked the minicam trigger in the On position, laid the camera on the hood of the police cruiser aimed at the wreck, then sprinted to the green car. There was a sign on the door, Sentinel 24, some kind of delivery service. The driver was in a green uniform that matched his car, just a kid, early twenties, with acne. He looked up at Cass vacantly and put the phone down.

"Come on, your damn car's on fire," Cass said, jerking the door open. "Get out of there!"

"I—I think my arm is broken," the kid said, gazing numbly up at him. "Look, you gotta help me, man. Toss this for me." He fumbled a plastic packet out of his uniform shirt pocket with his left hand and thrust it toward Cass. Pills, speeders, Black Beauties. "Throw it away, man," the driver begged. "My boss'll kill me if I get caught holdin'. Please! You gotta toss it for me!"

"You stupid bastard!" Cass snarled, grabbing the Baggie and throwing it toward the roadside. "If you don't come out of there right now you're gonna be toast! Now move it!" He grabbed the kid by his uniform lapels and hauled him bodily out of the car. One of the state cops hustled up with a fire extinguisher and smothered the blaze with a couple of blasts of foam.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is he all right?" the cop yelled.

"He says his arm's broken," Cass said, helping the driver to the shoulder of the road. He eased the kid down on the blacktop away from the action and left him huddled in a fetal position, cradling his arm.

Cass rescued his camera from the hood of the police cruiser and resumed filming the scene. An ambulance screamed up, its emergency flashers turning the scene into a flickering, surrealist dreamscape. Wilona wobbled over from the shoulder of the road, unsteady on her high heels, wide-eyed and shaken. "You ready to try another stand-up?" Cass asked.

"I think so," she said gamely, straightening her skirt. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm okay. Let's get the shot before—"

"Hey, you with the camera! Step over here." One of the state cops was motioning Cass toward the shoulder of the road.

"Officer, just give me a minute to get my shot and we'll—"

"That wasn't a request, champ, it was an order. Unless you want to spend the night on the county, get your butt over here now!"

Cass turned to face him. He was a sergeant, an older man. And the look on his seamed face was dead serious. Cass gave Wilona a "What next?" shrug and trotted over to the trooper.

"You recognize this?" the cop said, holding up a plastic packet full of pills by its corner.

"Looks like a stash to me," Cass said.

"That's exactly what it is. Yours, is it? I saw you throw it away."

"It's not mine. 'Crash' over there shoved it at me when I was trying to get him out of the car and asked me to toss it for him."

"And you did? You abetted a felony just to be a nice fella?"

"No! I mean, yes, I threw it away, but not because I meant to hide anything. I was just trying to get him out of his car. It was on fire, for God's sake."

"He says the stash is yours. Says he never saw it before."

"Well, what the hell do you expect him to say?" Cass snapped, exasperated. "Look, what do you think? That I ran over to help that miserable little jerk and suddenly decided to throw away a couple hundred bucks' worth of pills in front of two cops? Does that make sense to you?"

"Dopers never make sense to me," the trooper said suspiciously. "How do you know what the stash is worth?"

"I don't, exactly, but I'm a newsman, Officer. I've done more stories on dope than you've handed out parking tickets, and right

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now I'm trying to shoot a traffic accident. Look, the guy shoved his stash at me and I threw it aside. So maybe I should've bagged it for evidence or whatever you guys do, but I was kinda busy at the time, you know? The kid's obviously stoned to the bone and I'm stone-cold sober, so how about cuttin' me some slack and lettin' me do my job?"

The cop eyed him a moment, then nodded grudgingly. "Give me your driver's license."

"Fine," Cass said, fishing his license out of his wallet. "But I can save you some trouble. If you run a check on me, you'll find a conviction, five years ago, for coke. Which is another reason why I wouldn't toss any stashes in front of cops. Can I get back to work?"

"For now. Don't leave the scene."

"Leave?" Cass echoed, waving at the demolished K-Volt car. "Leave in what?"

The highway was turning into a mob scene as Cass made his way back to Wilona Klein. Traffic was stacking up behind the accident and rubberneckers were collecting like flies on a roadkill. A Samaritan EMT ambulance roared up, followed closely by a wrecker painted the same green as the kid's messenger car. Sentinel 24 Messenger Service. Two guys in green uniforms climbed out. One headed for the driver while a second trotted over to talk to the cops. Cass noted the elaborate digital police scanner on the wrecker's dashboard. Cutting-edge technology. Very impressive.

"What was that all about?" Wilona asked.

"Nothing much," Cass said. "Let's get the shot."

"It didn't look like nothing. Why did that cop take your driver's license?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, our company car is scrap city. Now get your—ah, hell, somebody covered up the body. Congrats, Klein, our fine wine of a shot just turned to vinegar. Okay, move between our car and the pickup and let's salvage what we can."

Wilona nodded, stepped over to the centerline, took a deep breath. Cass zeroed in on her, and then she disappeared as someone stepped in front of the camera, blocking the shot. Cass shifted position. So did the guy. It was the Sentinel 24 wrecker driver. A big man, red faced, with freckled ears and hands. And an attitude.

"Hey, do you mind?" Cass said, lowering the camera. "We're filming here."

"Sorry, but you can't photograph our vehicle," the guy said. "Company policy."

"Look, pal," Cass said, "we don't need permission to film your

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vehicle. It's part of an accident scene, which makes it news. Does freedom of the press ring a bell for you? Now please step aside."

"That vehicle's private property," Red said stubbornly. "I can't let you film it."

"Okay, I won't film your car, I'll film ours," Cass said. "But since the two of 'em are kinda welded together at the moment, it's gonna be a group picture, like it or not."

"A hundred bucks," the guy said suddenly. "No, five hundred. Five hundred bucks to leave our car out of the shot."

"What?"

"You heard me. C'mon, the company doesn't need this kind of publicity. I'll give you five hundred to leave us out of the picture."

"You got the five on you?" Cass asked.

"You'll get the money, just—"

"That's what I thought," Cass said. "Look, you've got your job to do and we've got ours. Now unless you want your smiling face on the six-o'clock news, step out of camera range, okay?"

"How about I take that camera and shove it—"

"Excuse me, sir," Wilona said, blocking Red's path and shoving her microphone in his face. "Could you give us your name and a comment on what happened here?"

The guy glared at her a moment, memorizing her face. Then he shrugged and stalked away.

"Nice job, Klein," Cass said. "You'll make a newswoman yet."

"No thanks to you, Novak," Wilona said grimly. "Now let's get this shot before we get beamed up by aliens or something."

Wilona nailed her stand-up on the next take, but just as they began to shoot a fifteen-second teaser, a KVLT car rolled up and Tommy Sawasky and Lamar Deets climbed out, K-Volt's first-string street reporting team. Tommy was blond, blow-dried, and wore contact lenses that were a perfect match for his KVLT blue blazer.

"Take a break, kids," Tommy said blandly as Lamar set up for a shoot. "Kessler decided the K-Volt car getting clobbered is gonna be the focus of the piece. You get any action shots, Cass? Bodies or anything?"

"Nope," Cass sighed, taking the camera off his shoulder. "It's all throwaway. B-bag or C."

"Wait a minute," Wilona protested. "We were here first. You guys can't just walk in and—"

"Sure we can, dear heart," Tommy said coolly. "If you'd been out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of school for more than twenty minutes you'd know a reporter can't cover a story she's involved in. Your car's the story, ergo, you're out. Why don't you fix your hair? Maybe I'll want to interview you."

"My hair *is* fixed, you pompous—"

"Cool it," Cass said, leading her away from the grinning reporter. "Tommy's right. We're off this."

"But it's not fair!" Wilona snapped. "And what's wrong with my hair, anyway?"

"Everything," Cass sighed. "But don't worry about it. Tommy won't interview you."

"But he just said . . ."

"He was jerking your chain, babe. No reporter ever gives another reporter free air time. But be cool about it, okay? We need a ride back to the station and Tommy and Lamar have the only functional K-Volt wheels in sight."

"I'd rather walk!"

"Right." Cass sighed. "Sure you would." But in the end, Wilona accepted a ride with Tommy and Lamar. Cass was stuck at the scene, waiting to answer more police questions. Eventually, a bored lieutenant took a two-sentence statement from him, returned his license, and told him to beat it. Cass caught a ride home with a photographer from the *Detroit Free Press.*

They stopped for beers at Kosciuko's, a landmark tavern in Warsaw Heights, a Slavic suburb north of Detroit. One beer turned to several, and it was nearly eleven when he stumbled into his apartment. He flipped on the KVLT late news and collapsed on the couch.

The accident was the lead story in A-bag, the first segment of the show. The anchors treated it as a joke. Tommy did his standup in front of the wrecked K-Volt car, saying the hulk was a perfect example of KVLT-TV's relentless drive to find breaking news, even if they had to break it themselves.

At the end of the broadcast, they flashed another shot of the wrecked car. "That's why they call KVLT the Action News station," the weather girl quipped, and everybody laughed on cue. They didn't use a single frame Cass had shot. Nada. Zip. He was so bummed that for a moment he considered hitting the street again to score a couple of joints. But only for a moment. It was a lousy night to fall off the wagon. It was drizzling, and with his luck he'd probably get busted.

He tried to watch the *Tonight Show,* but dozed off in the middle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the monologue. And dreamed of frightened faces trapped in burning cars . . .

In the morning, he showered cold then dressed with a little more care than usual. He chose a tie that actually matched his jacket and found a pair of clean jeans without holes in the knees. Kessler was a stickler for appearance and Cass knew he'd have a lot to say about the wrecked studio sedan. He considered wearing dress pants but canned the idea. No point in going overboard.

He left his apartment ten minutes early, but as he unlocked the door of his battered Volvo, a horn beeped and someone called his name.

"Mr. Novak? Cass Novak?" A guy in a tailored three-piece suit stepped out of a silver top-of-the-line Jaguar XJ parked a couple of spaces behind Cass's Volvo. "Can you spare a minute, Mr. Novak?"

Cass hesitated, then walked back to the Jag. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Jerry Arlington, of Barrett, Arlington and Zeman, attorneys at law," he said, offering his hand. He was youngish, mid thirties, with thinning sandy hair, regular features, and a vacant smile. His suit had a muted pinstripe and he was wearing an American flag lapel pin. His car looked even better up close.

"Is somebody suing me?" Cass asked.

"No one I know of," Arlington said. "And frankly, I'm more interested in reaching a settlement than fighting a suit. My firm represents the Sentinel 24 Messenger Service."

"I see. And?"

"We're interested in putting yesterday's unfortunate incident behind us as quietly as possible. Did you seek medical attention after the incident?"

Cass eyed him a moment, then shook his head. "I picked up a few bruises, nothing that required a doctor."

"Still, the circumstances must have been a bit . . . unnerving. Mental anguish and all that."

"I hadn't thought much about it."

"So a settlement of, say, fifteen hundred dollars would cover your . . . peace of mind?"

"Fifteen hundred? I read somewhere that most nuisance suits are settled for from three to four thousand."

"Let's not quibble," Arlington said smoothly. "Shall we say ten thousand?"

"Ten thousand?" Cass echoed, raising an eyebrow. "Why do I get the feeling we're not talking about peace of mind anymore?"

"Because you're very perceptive," Arlington said, smiling. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

understand that you shot some film of the accident scene yesterday. Film like that can be of immense help to our clients in defending any nuisance suits that might arise. I'm authorized to offer you ten thousand for it. The original film, not a copy."

"I can't sell you the film. It belongs to the station."

"Does it? The question of whether art truly belongs to the artisan or his employer has been debated for centuries, Mr. Novak. In any case, how you obtain the film is your own affair, not ours. But I'm afraid the clock is running on this offer. As the Bard said, 'If 'twere done, 'twere best done quickly.' Or words to that effect."

"Sorry," Cass said, with a shrug. "The film isn't mine to sell."

"Of course it is. This is America, Mr. Novak. Everything's for sale. That's the miracle of capitalism. Our offer stands for twenty-four hours. Ten thousand, cash. Call me when you decide." He handed Cass a business card, then eased into the Jag, dropped it in gear, and glided away from the curb like a ghost. Cass watched him until he was out of sight. Nice car.

At the station, Cass checked his slot on the huge Plexiglas assignment board. Novak: Studio C-2. The green room? Odd. The green room was a lounge for interviewees waiting to go on camera. He checked the rest of the board. No interviews were scheduled. Curiouser and curiouser. He walked down the hall to C-2, rapped once, and stepped in.

A tall man was at the coffee machine, fortyish, with gunmetal gray hair worn boot-camp short, an indoor pallor, off-the-rack blue suit, and thick-soled shoes. Cop.

"Mr. Novak? I'm Lieutenant Landis. You want a coffee?"

"No, thanks," Cass said, making no move to sit. "What's up?"

"Not much. I have a few questions about the accident."

"Funny, you don't look much like a traffic cop to me. Which division did you say you worked?"

"I didn't say," Landis said, sipping his coffee. "But for the record, I work narcotics out of Warsaw Heights."

"Ah hell, this is about that clown's stash, isn't it? Look, I told the cop on the scene what happened, the guy—"

"Gave you a packet of drugs and you threw them away for him," Landis said, cutting him off. "I've read your statement, Mr. Novak."

"Then you know exactly what went down. I didn't hide anything, I was just trying to get the guy out of the car."

"So you said. Did you know him, Mr. Novak? The driver, I mean."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Never saw him before in my life."

"Are you sure? His name was Madden, Mr. Novak. Kenny Madden. Perhaps you had mutual friends?"

"You've lost me. What friends?"

"Dopers, Mr. Novak. It's been my experience that dopers know a lot of the same people: dealers, other users. And you're a doper, Mr. Novak. You've got a record."

Cass took a deep breath, then turned and closed the green-room door. "That was awhile back. If you've seen my sheet you know it was a coke bust in L.A. more than five years ago. It cost me my job and damned near everything else. I've cleaned up my act since then. I've had no trouble here, and I sure as hell don't want any."

"You closed the door," Landis noted. "I take it your employer doesn't know about your record?"

"What do you think?"

"I think that if I were in your situation, and some junkie shoved a stash at me then claimed it was mine, I'd be unhappy about it."

"It was no big deal. Madden was afraid to get caught holding so he tried to dump it on me. I might've done the same a few years ago."

"No hard feelings? Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you want," Cass said warily. "That's how it was. Madden was stoned, anyone could see it, and he was the one who plowed into an accident scene, not me. So why are you busting my chops? Gimme a break, Landis, my job's hanging by a thread as it is."

"So I understand," Landis said. "I had a little chat with your boss before you came in. He said you were somewhat less than reliable. And a bit of an attitude case."

"I care about my work," Cass said evenly. "Kessler only cares about expense accounts. Did you tell him about my record?"

"Not yet. And I won't. As long as you cooperate."

"Cooperate how? Look, what's going on here? If you know the stash isn't mine—"

"The stash is the least of your problems, Mr. Novak. Do you own a car?"

"A car? Sure. A ten-year-old Volvo. So?"

"Have you been in any accidents recently?" Landis asked.

"It's got a ding in the front where somebody creamed me in a parking lot a few months ago," Cass acknowledged. "What's all this about my car?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just a few more questions," Landis said, waving off his objections. "Where did you go after the accident last night, Mr. Novak?"

"I . . . had a few beers with a photog from the *Freep,* a guy named Meyers. I got home about eleven."

"Alone?"

"That's right."

"Can anyone confirm that you were at home around midnight, say? Did you make any phone calls, have any visitors?"

"No," Cass said slowly. "No one. Why?"

"Because there was another accident last night, Mr. Novak. Somebody ran down Kenny Madden in an alley off the Cass Corridor around midnight. He's dead."

"Dead?" Cass echoed, shaken.

"You look a little green, Mr. Novak. Why should Madden's death upset you? I thought you didn't know him."

"I didn't, but . . ." Cass's voice trailed off. For a moment he could see Madden's face again. And the fear in his eyes.

"I'd like your permission to have our crime lab check out your car, Mr. Novak. Just routine, to eliminate you as a suspect."

"And if I object you talk to my boss, right?"

Landis stared at Cass like an exterminator eyeing an interesting breed of cockroach. "You're a bright guy," he said at last. "What do you think?"

Cass fished his car keys out of his jeans, took his apartment key off the ring, and tossed the keys to Landis. "When do I get it back?"

"Maybe this evening if nothing interesting turns up. Thanks for your cooperation, Mr. Novak. Have a nice day." Landis strolled out of the room without a backward glance.

Damn. Cass took a deep breath, then walked slowly back to the newsroom, thinking all the way. There was no new assignment penciled in on the board. He glanced toward the manager's glass-walled cubicle. Kessler was standing in the doorway. He waved Cass over. He didn't look happy, but he seldom did.

Kessler was a barrel of a man, square from head to foot. He was a balding nail-biter who wore both a belt and suspenders. And probably held up his socks with garters.

"Shut the door, Novak," Kessler said, easing his bulk down into the executive chair behind his desk. "That was quite a mess you got into on the Dixie last night."

"We parked on the shoulder and our flashers were on." Cass shrugged. "The guy bounced off two other cars before he hit us. It wasn't our fault."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Wasn't your fault, you mean. You were driving."

"But I was legally parked. What's the problem? The station's insured, right?"

"Minus the deductible. Minus the rate increase we'll get at renewal. But those aren't your problems, are they? You just work here. Or you did. Let's cut to the chase, Novak. You know the station's downsizing its news staff, so as one old newsman to another, I'd suggest you start looking. Hard."

"Why? Just because some wacko rams a station car?"

"Lower your voice, please. I'm trying to give you a break here, Cass."

"Some break! How do you treat people you don't like?"

"I ask them whether they lied about drug convictions on their job applications," Kessler snapped. "Clear enough?"

"Yeah," Cass said slowly. "That's clear. That dirty—"

"Save it. You've got no one to blame but yourself. Look, I don't want to fire you, morale here's already at rock bottom. And you don't want me to state my reasons in your personnel file. So you're going to resign. You've got two weeks to find another job. I'll keep your assignments minimal to free up some time for you and I'll give you a recommendation. Count your blessings. And close the door on your way out."

"Right," Cass said, taking a deep breath. He turned and walked out, closing the door carefully behind him. It took every ounce of "won't" power that he possessed to keep from slamming it off its hinges.

He spent the rest of the afternoon calling around town without getting so much as a nibble. The Detroit TV market was tight. If he wanted a job, he was going to have to come up with an angle. . . .

He leaned back in his office chair, put his feet up on the desk, and mused about his situation for a while. But amid the thoughts of his own troubles, an image kept crowding in. Madden's face. Frightened, pleading with him. Things could definitely be worse, Cass thought. At least I'm still alive.

He sat there brooding a bit longer, then caught a ride with a homebound office staffer who dropped him at the Warsaw Heights police department. He flashed his press credentials at the front desk, asked for Landis, and got directions to Narcotics.

The office door was open. Landis was at a plain metal desk in his shirtsleeves, his nose buried in paperwork. He glanced up momentarily when Cass entered, then went back to his reading.

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Novak?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You can release my car. I need it. To look for work."

"I said maybe today. The lab's running behind. With luck, you'll have it tomorrow."

"I want it now. We had a deal. I gave you the car without a warrant so you wouldn't talk to my boss about my record. But you'd already told him about it."

"If Mr. Kessler knows about your record, he didn't hear it from me."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

Landis looked up slowly, a faint flush rising above his collar. "I've been known to tell a fib or two in my time, Mr. Novak," he said evenly. "But not this time. Was there anything else?"

"Maybe there is," Cass said, reversing the straight-backed metal chair facing Landis's desk and sitting in it with his arms folded across the back. "A few things you said this morning have been bothering me. And since we're both in the information biz, why don't we do a little trading?"

"What kind of trade?"

"Let's talk about Madden and the company he worked for."

"The Sentinel 24 Messenger Service? What about it?"

"When I got to his car last night, Madden was panicked. He'd already called the company's wrecker service. The thing was, his damned arm was broken but he was a lot more worried about getting caught with a stash. Only it wasn't the cops he was afraid of. What he actually said was, 'My boss will kill me.' "

"My boss will kill me? Interesting. And you thought he was speaking literally, did you?"

"Not at the time, no. But now he's dead, isn't he? There's more. Two guys with a messenger-service wrecker showed up just a few minutes after Madden rammed our car. One of them tried to buy our film of the accident and got pushy when I turned him down. And this morning, an attorney named Arlington offered me money to steal the film."

"Did he now? And did you take the deal?"

"Of course not."

"Then no crime was committed, right?" Landis said. "So what's the problem?"

"Look, I didn't just fall off a turnip truck, Landis. It isn't uncommon for companies to try to avoid bad publicity, but these guys are way over the line."

"I'd say offering a bribe to commit theft certainly is. I don't sup-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pose there were any witnesses to Arlington's offer? A tape recording? Maybe a video?"

"Sorry. He stopped me in the street outside my apartment."

"So the bribe offer comes down to your word against his?"

"I didn't say I had evidence, just information. And now it's your turn. What's up, Landis? What's goin' on?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Don't jerk me around, Lieutenant. Madden has one accident and a few hours later he's killed in another one. It was a hit-and-run, but you seem to be treating it like a murder. Only if it really was a homicide, why is your section investigating it? You're in Narcotics. So if we're actually talking about a murder, then it must be mixed up with narcotics. How'm I doing?"

Landis eyed him neutrally for a moment. "You're talking," he said at last. "I'm still listening."

"Okay, Madden was a doper, and a doper dying in this town, accidentally or otherwise, isn't exactly hot news. But you seem awfully interested in it. So much so, that I figure Madden had to be one of your snitches, some poor shlub you busted and were using to get at somebody bigger. Like maybe the people he worked for? The boss he was afraid of? At Sentinel 24?"

"That's not bad," Landis acknowledged grudgingly. "Pure speculation, of course, but at least it proves you didn't fry your brains completely back in L.A. So what do you want from me?"

"A fair trade. Look, I'm jammed up. A hot story might save my job and whatever's up with Sentinel 24 might be one. So maybe we can help each other out. What can you tell me about them?"

"Not much. Sentinel 24's a new company, it's based in Michigan but has branch offices scattered around the Midwest. Their corporate headquarters is north of Motown in the boonies, just off the freeway near Howell. They're a messenger service. They pick up and deliver packages all over Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincy, Naptown. Their operation's regional, so far, but it's growing."

"Sounds like an American success story. So what makes you so interested?"

Landis hesitated, then shrugged. "We're off the record now, right?"

"Understood."

"All right. Two things bother me about Sentinel 24. First, a lot of their deliveries are to and from drugstores in high-crime areas. And second, the Sentinel 24 Corporation is owned by a dummy company in the Cayman Islands but the real owner is right here in Detroit. Does the name Bo Zeman mean anything to you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I've heard it. He's some kind of mobster, right?"

"That was the father. He was a Purple Gang grad, heavy into the narcotics trade for years. The old man's supposedly retired now and I hope it's true. He was as nasty a piece of work as I've ever come across. His son, Bo junior, on the other hand, is apparently straight as a nail. He's an attorney with Arlington's firm. But he and his old man are the real owners of the Sentinel 24 Messenger Service."

"Maybe they concealed their ownership because of the old guy's reputation."

"Possibly," Landis conceded. "Whenever we stop Sentinel 24 cars, for traffic or whatever, the paperwork for the drugs they're carrying is always in perfect order. And that's a truly frightening thought. That Sentinel 24 might be a legitimate business controlled by a second-generation crime family."

"If Sentinel 24's legitimate, what was Kenny Madden so afraid of? And why is he so dead?"

"As you said, a doper getting run over in this town isn't hot news," Landis said with a shrug. "Madden's death could be just a coincidence. And if Arlington is overzealous about protecting his client, so what? If Bo Zeman was my client, I'd damn sure do my best to keep him happy, too."

"It has to be more than that."

"What makes you think so?"

"Madden," Cass said simply. "You didn't see his face. I did. I still do. But the bottom line is, you don't really have anything on these guys. There's no story here."

"I don't deal in stories, Mr. Novak, only evidence. Give me some evidence, maybe I can give you a story."

"Right now, I'll settle for getting my car back."

"Tomorrow," Landis said, returning to his paperwork. "I can give you a definite maybe on that."

"A nature shot?" Wilona Klein said, gazing up at the Plexiglas assignment board.

"Kessler wants some footage for a sporting goods store," Cass said. "Look, I'm probably gonna move on soon, Klein, so you'd better try to find another partner. Maybe you should consider working as a story editor. You're a pretty good writer."

"And I don't look so hot on film anyway? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"I didn't say that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Maybe I just need to work with somebody who sees me as something besides a green kid, Novak. Besides, I've already asked for a new partner. Don't look so surprised, you know what the grapevine's like in this business. A pal over at Channel Fifty told me you called over there looking for work. She said they're definitely interested."

"No kidding?" Cass said. "And what elevated position of authority does this pal of yours hold?"

"She's a greenie, like me," Wilona said, unoffended. "Like you were too, once upon a time. I saw you once back then."

"Back when?"

"When you were still at Fifty, before you went out to L.A. My high-school class went through on a tour and you talked to us. You told us to forget about TV and get real jobs. Do you remember?"

"Remember talking to a bunch of kids ten years ago? You've gotta be kidding."

"I remember you," she said evenly. "I thought you were really cool back then. You had a passion for your work that came through no matter how you tried to downplay it. And you were a lot nicer. Enjoy your day in the country, Novak."

"Hey, Klein, wait a minute," he called after her as she stalked across the newsroom. She didn't look back.

It should have been a hoot, driving around the southern Michigan countryside on company time looking for something scenic to shoot. It wasn't. For one thing, Cass was a street kid from Warsaw Heights, the white Harlem of Detroit. He was as out of his element in the green hills as an elephant in the Renaissance Center. The second problem was Madden. Alone in the KVLT sedan with only the garbled buzz of his police scanner for company, Cass kept seeing Madden's face superimposed on the meadows and pine-covered hills. And the fear in his eyes.

"Toss it man, please. My boss'll kill me." Madden had looked so . . . lost. So scared. God. Cass could remember exactly what that kind of fear felt like from his own doper days. And so he'd tossed the stash. And maybe he'd thrown his career away along with it.

Still, for today at least, he had a job, and one nice thing about Michigan, nature's never far away. You can find it almost anywhere. Cass turned east off the Holly exit, then took a quick left onto a back road. For nearly five miles it was undeveloped country: trees, bushes, hills. Not a house or a barn. Zip. And then suddenly, there it was. The Sentinel 24 Corporation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Landis hadn't exaggerated, the place was big. Several acres of warehouses spread out behind a two-story brick main office. There was an enclosed parking lot for employees and a second lot for a fleet of green messenger cars with the company logo on their doors. Beyond them, an immaculately kept lawn rolled away into the distance, as pristine as a putting green.

The plant security setup was as impressive as the layout. The grounds and parking lots were surrounded by a ten-foot chain-link fence topped by bayonet wire, and the entrance was blocked by a guard gate complete with a crash bar that would have done an iron-curtain country proud. Or a company that regularly transported consignments of prescription drugs.

Cass cruised by slowly, eyeing the installation. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. A green Sentinel car pulled out of the gate as he passed, headed for the freeway.

He followed the road for a few miles until it dead-ended, then made a U-turn and partially retraced his route. A mile short of the plant, he eased off on the shoulder and parked. He took his Steadycam and began working his way up into the hills. It had rained earlier in the day and the grass was still damp. He was soaked to the thighs before he'd covered ten yards. Cursing softly, he blundered through a thick growth of aspens to the crest of a bluff directly across the road from the Sentinel 24 Corporation main office.

Using the brush for camouflage, he shouldered his camera and began to film. He made multiple passes over the buildings first, then the grounds beyond, zeroing in on points of interest: the bayonet wire, the guard gate, the tower-mounted TV cameras posted at the corners of the grounds. One of the cameras was swiveling in his general direction. Had he been spotted?

Cass eased a bit farther back into the thicket and crouched in the shadows, waiting for the guard camera to complete its arc. It stopped a moment, then reversed itself, panning slowly back toward the parking lots. And he released a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. False alarm. Good.

He considered shooting more footage, but there was really no point. If there was any skullduggery going on here, it wasn't happening out in the open. Besides, the sky was darkening ominously in the west. Even Cass's unpracticed eye could spot a serious storm in the making, and the last thing he needed was to be caught in a cloudburst in the back of nowhere. Time to go.

As he rose to leave, a flash of motion in the distance caught his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eye. A hawk was soaring ahead of the approaching storm, circling high above the Sentinel grounds. With the dark clouds to frame it, it would make one helluva nature shot. Cass knelt, shouldered his camera, and centered the hawk in his viewfinder. Great stuff, he could already visualize it in slow-mo . . . And then the hawk suddenly fell, plummeting out of the sky like a stone. At the last possible moment before striking the ground, it abruptly spread its wings to break its fall. And pounced on an unfortunate critter it had spotted crossing the middle of that immaculate lawn.

A mouse? Cass couldn't be sure at that distance, but it didn't matter much. It was Mrs. Hawk's lunch now. With its prey clutched in its talons, the raptor rose to the sky again, magnificent against the thunderheads. And then it faded as the air around it turned to a silver haze, and then a darker gray. Rain. A major freaking rainstorm. And it was coming on like an express train.

Damn! Cass rose and sprinted for his car, blundering through the underbrush like a gut-shot buffalo. He was making fair time and figured he had a shot at making his car before rain ran him down, when he stumbled over a root and tumbled headlong into the underbrush. He lay there a minute, chest heaving, trying to collect himself. Then he got stiffly to his feet and looked around to get his bearings.

He was about a hundred yards uphill from his car now. The Sentinel 24 grounds were well off to the west, already wreathed in rain. He was gonna get wet, no doubt about it. He started to wrap his camera in his jacket, then hesitated. There was something wrong, something different about the headquarters site. He shouldered the Steadycam, zeroed in on the plant grounds, and began to shoot. The rain was obscuring the warehouses and parking lots. He couldn't see anything amiss, but his cameraman's instinct told him something was different. . . . He felt the first ice-pick spatters of rain on his arms.

The hell with this. As heavy as that rainstorm looked, he'd be lucky to find his car in it. He wrapped the camera in his coat, then made his way through the brush toward the K-Volt car as quickly as he could. Halfway there, the chill rain rolled over him, soaking him to the bone in an instant, cold as January. He gave up any thoughts of concealment and headed directly down the hillside to the road. Madden or no Madden, he was less worried about being spotted than losing his way in this freaking wilderness and winding up as an item on the eleven o'clock news. Flash: Body of missing cameraman found half-eaten by bears.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He stumbled out of the brush onto the blacktop and trotted to the car, slid the Steadycam across the seat, then climbed in out of the rain. He sat there a moment, catching his breath, trying to put his finger on what had been different about the plant the second time he filmed it. Something had definitely changed, but . . . Nothing came. Maybe he could spot it on the way out.

He fired up the sedan and eased onto the road. Not much danger of traffic since the road was a dead end, still he was extra cautious. Visibility in the downpour was no more than fifty yards, so he kept his speed down, well under forty. He slowed as he passed the Sentinel 24 site, but he could barely make out the buildings now, much less the grounds beyond. Everything he could see looked the same . . . except that the surveillance cameras weren't scanning the grounds. They were focused directly on his car, keeping pace with it as it crawled past the plant.

And then he glimpsed headlights in his rearview mirror, coming up fast. Much too fast. But from where? They hadn't come from the plant gate, and the road behind him was a dead end.

Instinctively, he floored the sedan, pedal to the metal, fishtailing on the rain-slicked roadway until the tires caught and he surged ahead. Fifty, sixty. Too fast for conditions, but Cass was beyond caring. Madden had been run down, and his gut told him somebody meant to make him a statistic too.

The headlights were gaining. From the hazy outline of the vehicle, Cass guessed it was a truck of some kind. But then its lights disappeared below the level of the K-Volt sedan's trunk as the driver tried to ram Cass from the rear. Cass cranked the sedan's wheel, skidding the car across the centerline. The truck blew by on the inside, hit the shoulder of the road, and slewed back and forth as the driver fought to get it under control.

It was a black pickup truck, rednecked to the max, jacked up, with oversize tires, a light bar across the roof, and twin chrome exhaust stacks on either side of the cab. Fortunately, its hot-rod styling worked against it, especially in the rain. Pickups are tricky to handle at high speed anyway, and on slick pavements their rear wheels tend to develop minds of their own. Unbalanced minds at that. Cass had been driving the streets of Detroit since he was fourteen. If he couldn't outmaneuver a jacked-up pickup on a wet road, he deserved to get run over.

Which is exactly what the pickup driver was trying to do. He made two more passes, attempting to hammer the K-Volt car off the road. Cass managed to evade him, but he was running out of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time. He could out-drive this psycho on the twisting blacktop, but once they hit the freeway the pickup's superior power and speed would give it a deadly edge.

Cass floored the accelerator, as though he was making a run for it. The pickup stayed right on his tail, crowding him. Its driver was so intent on running the sedan down that he didn't realize they'd come to the freeway entrance ramp, a long, curving one-lane with a posted speed of thirty-five.

They hit the ramp at seventy-plus. Cass slowed a bit, fighting to keep the sedan on the road. The pickup driver seized the opportunity to ram the KVLT car again, but this time Cass didn't try to avoid him. Instead, he jammed the brakes, hard.

The pickup slammed into the rear of the sedan, throwing both vehicles into a skid, and then inertia took over. Cass fought to keep the sedan on the road, turning into the skid and wrestling its tail back in line.

The pickup's greater weight and speed spun it wildly out of control. It hit the rainsoaked turf at the edge of the ramp and skidded off the road and over the rim of the embankment. Halfway down, a tire blew and the truck flipped, tumbling end over end, finally crunching to a halt in a ditch beside the freeway, upside down.

Cass watched it in his rearview mirror for as long as he could, but there was no movement. And then he lost sight of it in the rain. He called 911 on his cellular phone to report the accident, and then he matted the sedan's accelerator, hammer down, headed for Motown.

The six o'clock news was on the air live when he got back to the station. The anchors were on the set delivering the A-bag section, headline news. The director, cameramen, and studio techs were all focused on the show, the high point of their professional day. Cass took his film into the processing booth and closed the door, cutting himself off from the noise of the studio. He plugged the cassette into a deck, then tapped the switches that downstreamed the tape signal to a digital FX machine that gave him total control of the film: speed, focus, framing, the works. The door opened behind him and he glanced around. And stared in surprise. Wilona Klein had stepped into the booth. She was dressed in scruffy jeans and a faded army-surplus jacket and her hair was combed back in a taut ponytail. He barely recognized her. Minus the bouffant and studio makeup, she looked strikingly different. Like her own younger brother. Sort of.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Can we talk, Novak?" she asked.

"Sure, if it can wait for a minute. I need to check over this film first, okay?"

"What is it?" she asked, easing down into the seat beside him at the console.

"Mother nature," Cass said, swiveling back to face the monitor. "My day in the country."

"Really? So what's that? Some kind of a factory?"

"That, dear heart, is the corporate headquarters of the Sentinel 24 Messenger Service. Among other things, it delivers drugs all over the Midwest. It's controlled by a hood named Bo Zeman, but it's apparently a legitimate business. On the other hand, the guy that ran into our car last night worked for Sentinel 24. A few hours after he hit us, he was killed, supposedly in an accident. A hit-and-run. And just after I shot this film, some yahoo in a pickup truck tried to run me off the road. He lost it, did a brodie over an embankment, and wound up in worse shape than the wreck we filmed yesterday."

"You're kidding," she said, reading his face.

"I'm dead serious, lady. And I just missed being seriously dead."

"But it was a pickup truck? Not a Sentinel 24 vehicle?"

"We're talking about a crime family here," Cass said. "Give them some credit for subtlety."

"Maybe. Or maybe there's no connection. As a neutral observer, isn't it possible you got crossways of some backwoods ridgerunner stoked on happy juice?"

"I guess it's possible. But I don't like the odds much."

"Neither do I. On the other hand, I can't say anything looks particularly sinister about their corporate headquarters."

"Don't the security precautions strike you as a bit extreme?"

"For a place with drugs on the premises? Get real, Novak. Most hospitals in this town have armed guards in the halls."

"So if everything's copacetic at Sentinel 24, why did they try to run me off the road?"

"Maybe it's your charming personality," Wilona cracked. "What's with the bird?"

"That's my hawk. Kessler wanted a nature shot and I deliver my assignments, even when they're chickenshit. Or in this case, hawk pucky. Pretty, isn't she?"

"That's a nice piece of film," Wilona conceded grudgingly. "I thought you were a city boy. Those cloud banks—"

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," Cass said, as the hawk suddenly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

plummeted earthward. "Watch this." The camera followed her fall to the turf where she seized the mouse and rose again into the air.

"So much for Mother Nature," Wilona said.

"What do you mean? What's more natural than murder in the great outdoors?"

"Don't you think the fence kind of dents your illusion? When the hawk snatches that poor mouse, the chain-link fence is in the background."

"Easily fixed," Cass said, spinning a dial on the FX control panel. "If I zoom in on the hawk till she fills most of the screen, we lose the fence. Voilà!"

"You just screwed up the color."

"I didn't touch the color. What are you talking about?"

"Back up the film a little," Wilona said, reaching past him to punch Reverse. "Look at your mouse. He's green."

"It must be just a trick of the light."

"Cass, that mouse is as green as grass."

"So it's a country mouse. Maybe they eat grass or something."

"Cass, mice are mice, city or country. And they aren't green. Ever."

"Look, forget the damned mouse, okay? Kessler wanted a nature shot and he's got it. There's something I want to see farther along on the tape . . . right here."

"That's the Sentinel 24 site again, right?" Wilona asked. "From farther away?"

"Yeah, it started to rain and I took off, but something struck me as odd. . . ."

"What are those lines there above the lawn?"

Cass enlarged the frame, homing in on the lawn. "Sprinklers," he said slowly. "The sprinkler system is on. See, those curved lines are where the water's meeting the rain. That's what I saw. I just didn't realize it."

"Why would they turn it on while it's raining?"

"Maybe it's on a timer," Cass said, frowning at the screen. "Preset to go off at a given interval, rain or shine."

"Wait a minute. Back the film up to the mouse again."

"Will you forget the freakin' mouse, Klein? All right, all right," he conceded, punching the Reverse button before she did it for him. "Okay, freeze it there, Cass, and back away from the closeup to bring in the background . . . there. I'll be damned."

"What are you looking at, Klein? The fence?"

"Not the fence, the lawn, city boy. Look at it closely."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So they've got a nice lawn. From the looks of that place they can afford as much lawn as . . . whoa. My, my, my, that really *is* a great-lookin' lawn, isn't it? In fact, it looks too good to be true. It's not real, is it? It's Astroturf or something."

"I'd say so." Wilona nodded in agreement. "And even if they saved maintenance costs by using artificial grass—"

"—they sure as hell wouldn't have to water it," Cass finished for her. "Especially not in the rain. So what are we looking at here? What's going on?"

"I haven't a clue," Wilona said, shaking her head, "except that I was right about that mouse. He really is as green as the grass. Look at him. He's the same color."

Cass refocused to pull the mouse back into closeup. "You're right, he is. But why? Artificial turf is some kind of high-tech plastic. They play football on it, for God's sake. If the color doesn't rub off on three-hundred-pound ballplayers, why should a mouse turn green? Hold on a minute." He rapid-reversed the film, back to the opening shots of the plant, freezing it on the fleet of Sentinel 24 cars parked in their own fenced lot. "Check out those cars. Does that color look familiar?"

Wilona nodded. "It's the same. The company cars are the same green as the grass. And the mouse."

"Right." Cass nodded slowly. "Except that I think you've got it backwards. The grass is as green as the cars. And I don't think it's a coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"Give me a minute," Cass said, leaning forward, examining the screen intently. "I need to work this out in my head . . . my God. It's brilliant. A perfect scam. They aren't running drugs. They're hustling cars."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's say you steal a car. What do you do with it?"

"I don't know, chop it up for parts or repaint it and sell it again."

"Correct, and the riskiest part is getting it off the street to a garage where you can work on it, right? But suppose you've got mini-stations all over town with room for maybe one car at a time. A hot car drives into a Sentinel 24 station, gets an instant green paint job, magnetic decals on the doors and cheap seatcovers. Fifteen minutes later it drives out as a Sentinel 24 delivery car with paperwork that proves it's on legitimate business. Drug business. So even if the cops stop you for some reason, it's the drugs that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

draw their attention. The car's all but invisible because it looks like the rest of the Sentinel 24 fleet."

"Cars could come and go and people would assume they were seeing the same ones," Wilona said slowly. "But they couldn't resell that many green cars. That paint must come off."

"Several kinds of paint are soluble," Cass agreed. "Hell, we use poster paint here at the station that wipes off with mineral spirits. They must be using something like it. Once the cars are at the main site, they wipe them clean, repaint 'em, alter the engine numbers, and give 'em titles to match. Then they can sell 'em anywhere. They could haul them out by the truckload from that place. They're only a few minutes off the freeway on a dead-end road with no neighbors."

"But why get rid of the secondhand paint by spraying it on the lawn?"

"An operation this size must go through a lot of green paint, and landfills are touchy about accepting chemicals, secondhand paint or anything else. They'd need permits to dump it legally, and the last thing they want is to draw attention to how much painting they're doing. So when it rains, it pours. They pump the secondhand paint out through the sprinkler system, spray it on the plastic grass, and hide it in plain sight. Green as grass."

"It's still just a theory, though," Wilona cautioned.

"I know, but damn it, everything fits. For the scam to work, the drug operation has to stay absolutely legitimate. But Kenny Madden was a doper. He got high, rammed our car, and now he's dead. They wanted our film of the accident scene in case it showed any paint scraped off of the Sentinel car, and their wrecker was on the scene in minutes to tow their car. Talk about damage control, the army could take lessons from these guys."

"But that's the problem, Novak. They did such a great job that you don't have any evidence. I'll admit it all seems to fit, but I can't see the cops doing handsprings over film of a green mouse."

"Who said anything about cops? We're in the news business, lady, and if we're right about this, the evidence is in that parking lot for fleet cars at the Sentinel 24 site. I'm betting that at least some of them are still wearing that first quick coat of soluble paint."

"I don't understand." Wilona frowned. "What are you planning to do?"

"I'm not sure yet. I need to think about it. If I go to Kessler with it, he'll only give it to Sawasky and Deets. He wants me gone and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it'll take more than a theory to change his mind. What would you do, Klein?"

"Me?"

"Sure, we're still a team, right? So what's your vote? Shop it to Channel Fifty? A story like this might get us in over there."

"I—look, you do what you think is right," Wilona said, rising. "I'm green as grass myself, remember?"

"But you're a bright kid. Bright enough to try to get rid of me by telling Kessler about my drug problem."

Wilona seemed to deflate inside her rumpled jacket. She looked about fourteen years old. "You know?" she said softly.

"I guessed. I thought at first Landis burned me, but he said no and I believed him, mostly because I couldn't see him giving the information away for free. Sawasky or Deets could have heard about it from the cop at the crash scene, but they wouldn't have ratted me out. They like me right where I am."

"What do you mean?"

"Simple. I'm below them on the food chain, lady. If the station downsizes again they know I'll be the next guy fired. But if Kessler replaces me with some low-salaried kid, guess whose heads will be the next to roll? Nope, the bottom line is, nobody really wanted me gone but you."

"I'm . . . sorry. It never occurred to me he'd actually fire you. I just hoped he'd assign me to somebody else. Someone who could make me look better on camera."

"Hell, maybe you were right," Cass sighed. "As a team, we haven't been setting the world on fire, have we? I've been doing my best, but a camera can't lie. You're just not what most people consider anchorwoman material."

"Really?" she said, stiffening. "Well, thanks for the encouragement, Novak, but I'm not quite ready to retire."

"I don't want you to quit, Klein. I want you to get through that fence at Sentinel 24 and wipe the green paint off one of the fleet cars while I shoot it. I want you to save my job and make yourself a reputation at the same time."

"But . . . Sawasky'd jump at the chance for a scoop like this. Anybody would. Why offer it to me when you know I sold you out?"

"I'm not sure I can explain it," Cass said quietly. "The thing is, I haven't been able to get Madden out of my mind. His face. How screwed up and scared he was. I even dreamed about him last night. Only I was the guy in the car, trying to get out. I guess a part of me knows it could have been me in that car."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't understand."

"Look, I got lucky, that's all. I got busted, went into treatment to avoid jail time, and managed to straighten up my act. Somehow, I got a second chance. Madden didn't and now he never will. There's nothing fair about that and no way to balance the books on it. Except maybe to pass along the favor. Does that make any sense to you?"

"A little," Wilona said. "I'll have to think about it. But meanwhile, count me in. How do you want to work this?"

"Fast. I'll get hold of Landis to arrange for the cavalry, then we'll put our theory to the test. One thing, though. Don't change your clothes, okay? I like this look on you. It looks . . . interesting. Fresh."

"Green as grass, you mean?"

"No," he said thoughtfully, meeting her eyes. "That's not what I meant at all."

They approached the Sentinel 24 site from the east just before dawn, skulking through the underbrush like burglars. Cass lifted the chain-link fence while Wilona crawled under it. He knelt to follow but she stopped him.

"Stay outside the fence and shoot me with a telephoto lens from here," she whispered. "If we're spotted, you can't run carrying a camera and I want this film on the air at seven." She turned and loped off toward the fleet cars without waiting for a reply.

Cass shouldered the Steadycam, filming her as she ran. She had a natural, androgynous grace that he'd somehow missed under the studio hairstyle. He felt a tightness in his chest, an excitement that had been absent for so long he hadn't realized it was gone.

Wilona reached the cars, quickly spritzed one with a small bottle of mineral spirits, and scrubbed the spot with a rag. And grinned in triumph as the green paint dissolved.

She quickly wiped "hot car" on the side of the vehicle, then rose and faced the camera. Cass zeroed in on her as she began her stand-up. He was only vaguely aware of doors opening across the lot, of men running toward Wilona, shouting, and the sound of sirens as Landis's strike force broke through the front gate. He was totally focused on her face, lost in the lens, a part of the camera.

But for just a moment, her image wavered, and he saw a second face superimposed over Wilona's. The junkie's face from his dream, lost and afraid. Madden's face. Or maybe his own. And then it was gone. Maybe this time it was gone for good. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Funny Story
BY LARRY BEINHART

Quiet Please—We're Rolling
BY PETER LOVESEY

The White Fawn
BY STEVEN SAYLOR

Star of the Silver Screen
BY JANICE LAW

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 108, No. 5. Whole No. 663, November 1996. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $43.45 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1996 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN: 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

DOROTHY CUMMINGS
Assistant Editor

TERRI CZECZKO
Art Director

ANTHONY BARI
Junior Designer

CYNTHIA MANSON
VP, Director of Marketing & Subsidiary Rights

GEORGE SCHUMACHER
Manager, Contracts & Permissions

JOE GALLAGHER
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

JUDY DORMAN
Advertising Sales Manager

PETER KANTER
Publisher

FRAN DANON
Editorial Director

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING OFFICES

NEW YORK 212-782-8549

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

DRESNER DIRECT, INC., New York, N.Y.
212-889-1078

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

QUEEN/HITCHCOCK combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

$1000 weekly processing mail. Free Details, send SASE: Dept A, PO Box 2822, Fullerton, CA 92633-2833.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperback, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free catalog! New and Recycled Detective Fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, 513-242-7527.

FREE catalogs. Collectible and used mystery fiction. Murder Is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429, 513-438-0211.

FREE catalog of used and collectible detective fiction. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609.

MANUCRIPTS WANTED, ALL TYPES. Publisher with 75-year tradition. "Author's Guide to Subsidy Publishing". 1-800-695-9599.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Affordable Accuracy Word Processing. 787 N. Colony Road., Unit 1-10, Meridan, CT 06450. (203) 237-0465, $1.25 pp + POST.

ARE YOU READY FOR THE FUTURE? Don't be left behind! Don't pay big phone bills. Pay yourself; it's easy! Ask me how. Dorothea, 1-800-218-9956.

EDUCATION AND INSTRUCTION

WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets. Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, New Bern, NC 28563.

FOOD

GOURMET SPICES and SEASONINGS. Make good food taste great! FREE CATALOG. Black Hills Marketing, P.O. Box 11147, Olympia, WA 98508-1147.

HOBBIES AND COLLECTIONS

PLASTIC MODEL KITS

For sale. From and of science fiction, TV, figures, space program, movies, etc. Old and new, hundreds available. FREE catalog. Also buying and trading. John F. Green Inc. 1821 W. Jacaranda Pl., Fullerton, CA 92633. (714) 526-5467 (800) 807-4759/Fax (714) 526-2127.

INVENTORS

INVENTORS: Receive your FREE information Kit about PATENTING and Marketing. New product ideas. The Concept Network, Professional and Inexpensive services, 1-800-835-2246 ext 197. Call Now!

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE

9th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, March 8, 1997. Seven day Western Caribbean cruise aboard Princess Cruises' magnificent new Sun Princess. Call CruiseWorks, 800-876-6664.

MYSTERY

FREE mystery fiction catalogues, lists and bargain catalogues. Aardvarks Booksellers, PO Box 585066, Orlando, FL 32858-5066.

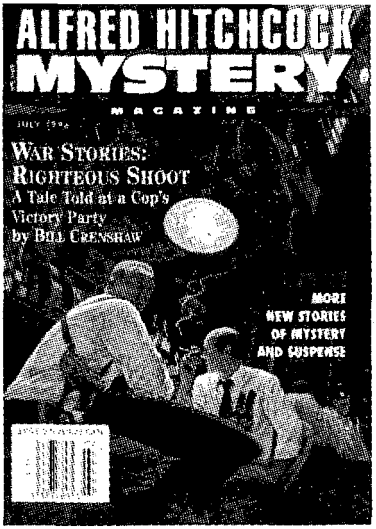
PERSONAL

Nationwide introductions! Refined singles 18-80. Also Japanese, Asian, European! Identify, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance and marriage with Americans! All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE (Dept. AHEQ), Romance House 20 Albion Street, Broadstairs, Kent, CT10 1LU, England. Tel: 01144-1843-863322 (24 Hrs).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SOME PEOPLE WOULD KILL...FOR A COPY.



But you don't need to! Subscribe to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine and you won't miss a single issue of all the mystery and intrigue you love. Each year you'll enjoy 10 issues of 160 pages and one double issue of more than 280 pages delivered directly to your door.

Plus when you subscribe for 2 years **you'll save more than 25%** off the regular price! Subscribe for 1 year and save more than 20%.

To order by charge card, call toll-free:

1-800-333-3311

Alfred Hitchcock • P.O. Box 5124
Harlan, IA 51593

2 years (24 issues) for only $49.97 or 1 year (12 issues) for $25.97*

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. **Outside USA:** Add $5 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S funds. This offer expires 6/30/97. *We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

HA620

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE BUTLER DID IT?

STAY TUNED... SUBSCRIBE NOW AND FIND OUT WHODUNIT!

2 years (24 issues) for only 49.97 (you save more than 25%!)
or 1 year (12 issues) for $25.97 (you save more than 20%!)*

CALL NOW
1-800-333-3053

OR
MAIL TO
ELLERY QUEEN
P.O. Box 5127
Harlan, IA 51593

Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside USA: Add $5 per year for shipping & handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. Offer expires 6/30/97. *We publish a double issue in September/October which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

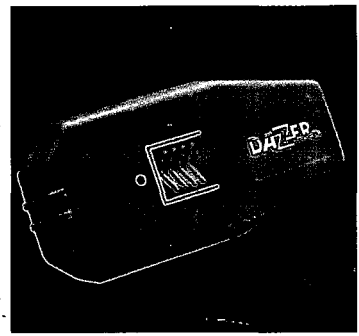
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HA612

Select Styles Emporium

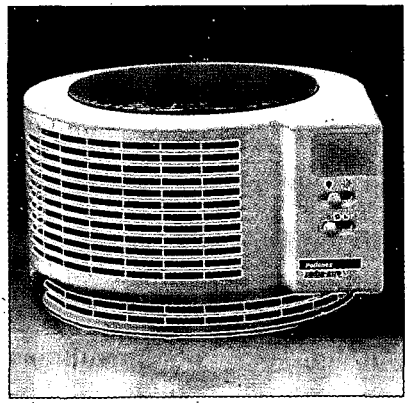
The Ultrasonic Deterrent - The Dazer™

The Dazer is a hand held dog deterrent. Utilizing safe, humane, ultra sound technology the Dazer is a must for joggers, bicyclists, the postman and especially kids and seniors. The Dazer works by producing a discomforting, but not harmful, high frequency sound audible only to dogs. Unlike mace and other chemical deterrents there is no harm to the animal. Its compact, lightweight and features a belt clip for easy carrying. Shipped with a 9 volt battery. **#2EQ202**



$34.98 ($5.95 S&H)

Table Top IONIZER Air Freshener - with Three Filters



This revolutionary air cleaner uses four technologies to clean, deodorize and eliminate bacteria from the air. First, a High Densisty Carbon Prefilter traps odors and captures larger particles. Next the unique BioGerm™ filter eliminates germs, including staph and strep bacteria. Then a Hospital Grade HEPA Main Filter removes 99% of all airborne particles (0.3 microns or larger) while the 5 needle ionizer further reduces pollutants and freshens and revitalizes the air. Filters the volume of air in a 12' x 16' room 3x per hour. 110 volts UL Listed **#2EQ909**

$129.98 ($11.95 S&H)

Call Toll Free:
1-800-580-9445
NJ Residents Add 6% Sales Tax
Canadian Orders Add $6.00

VISA MasterCard DISCOVER

To Order By Mail Send Check or Money Order To:
Point to Point
PO Box 2007
Brick, NJ 08723

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED